

Behind the Wall

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Ecclesiastes 5:10: He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity.

Dedicated to those who stand with me: Robert, Alex, Jim, James,
Donald and Alan.

Behind the Wall

John Armstrong Walker

1. Going behind the Wall

Berlin October 1984. In the year mentioned, Theo Rosenberg went with a friend behind the wall. This was an extraordinary thing for a young man from Scotland to do. It may only have been a day-trip, but there was no excursion like it anywhere in Europe, let alone the world.

Theo knew tourists could do that; for the east had now opened up for those in the west. This arrangement came about after a joint agreement between governments on either side of the wall. After all, trade had to go on even in a time of a Cold War.

Theo was there with his friend Maurice Jack. Maurice had been in desperate need of a break. He had not long been through a major operation, and a divorce. Theo was a copywriter working for the Johnstone and Johnstone advertising agency in the city centre of Glasgow, and had taken a week's holiday.

Maurice understanding the appetites of men and women, and seeing the change in the eating habits of

the Glaswegians, the year before had opened up an exclusive French restaurant in the west end of the city. The two men met one night. It was not in Maurice's brasserie, but in an Italian restaurant in Glasgow, near Sandyford Place. Both young men were invited there by different girlfriends.

The two young men had one thing in common: they loved the free life. This indeed brought them together, and within a few months, they had booked the hotel Franke, situated at the far end of the Kurfurstendamm, Berlin. The day they arrived there was the twentieth of October, nineteen eighty four.

At this time, the big attraction about Berlin was still of course the Second World War. They soon found out the day pass that got you into the Soviet controlled sector was nothing other than a train ticket.

Yes, you could be a hero 'just for one day'. Prior to going to Berlin, they were informed by articles in the press, and guide books, that there were different ways you could go behind the wall. What an experience that was for tourists to pass through something that separated lovers, family and friends. And they read if you wanted to come back another way you could do that too through Checkpoint Charlie, as it was called.

That morning on the way down for breakfast, inside the lift of the Hotel Franke, Theo noticed a colourful poster on the wall, advertising that the Berlin Film Festival was on when they were here. The image of the blue jacket, rainbow tie, and cut out eye on the lapel looked interesting: "The Noah's Ark principle," said Theo to Maurice, reading one of the promoted films on the list.

Maurice gave a resigned look that said he would not be going, even if Theo was. They had what was called a

continental breakfast. After that they made an enquiry at the reception desk about what was going on in the city. He was a friendly young student who worked there, and he chatted to them and helped them where he could. Due to the fact most of the staff did not speak English, he informed them that he was the only one, and if they needed help to seek him out in the morning after breakfast.

Theo and Maurice liked him, and before leaving the hotel, the bright young German student gave them what they were after: "Head for the train station; you can board a train there to go to the east."

"If we are not at breakfast tomorrow, will you come and get us?" joked Theo, after thanking him.

Even though a tourist at breakfast in the hotel Franke had said that during the war posters were up along the main street against the Jews, as they walked along the Kurfurstendamm, West Berlin, they could see it was a thriving city, and they were both quite taken by it. The weather was cold, but dry.

The train platform for East Berlin was down below on the lower level. The station looked normal enough. It was only after the train pulled away that the atmosphere, however, became strange. Like most people in life, they had never been through ghost stations before.

Looking at all the sandbags, here and there, dark shadows, and grimy places, time seemed to linger as if it did not want to go anywhere. Those images through the misty train window certainly made them take things over. So much so that they missed the stop to get off, in what was called the eastern sector, and they had to go round again on the train to get off behind the wall.

When they did finally alight, underground in the east, they could not help but notice the distinct change in the atmosphere. The two friends could see everyone around them noticed this too. However, in good faith they followed their fellow travellers up the stairs, and there they waited in a queue to enter what looked like a dark green portacabin.

As they stood in the queue, someone behind Theo spoke in a foreign English accent. In a deep suspicious tone, he said to his companion: "The Stasi check you here."

When it came to Theo's turn he noticed, as he walked forward, the strange feature that there was no handle on the cabin door. Once inside the control point, he handed over his passport to the East German soldier.

The young guard dutifully looked at it, then him, glanced back at his British passport, stamped it, then passed it back to Theo under the glass space.

Outside the cabin, Theo wondered where Maurice was. He knew he had been directed to the other cabin. He thought he had better not hang about outside the control area, so he followed the others up another set of stairs and soon found himself outside on the street.

In a strange moment of wonder, Theo was surrounded by large unknown grey anonymous buildings. Now that he was standing on an East German street, Theo Rosenberg from the west could see that he had entered into a different world. His senses although dulled from the beer the night before came to life quickly, as if to alert the man from the west where he was; for desolation was all around him now.

Theo spoke that word out loud to himself, as if to confirm it to another soul somewhere in time and space. He did this even though he knew no one was there to

hear it. Like other times in his life, he hoped by expressing a thought in a word it would comfort him.

Theo had never seen anything like this before. He knew he had never been anywhere like this before either. It was as if time had stood still since the end of the Second World War in 1945. They may have filled in the shell holes and patched up the buildings, but that is what made it so fearful. The chilling image remained; for the system that had overturned the last one was just as fearful as the one that had been defeated.

Thankfully, Maurice was not that far behind him. Theo reckoned the other cabin must have been held up for some reason due to someone's passport.

When Maurice got outside on the street, he confirmed this and although happy to see his friend standing there, he too felt the change in the surroundings.

It was not in his friend's nature to lead a conversation, or topic, even when a sudden change had taken place. Maurice just greeted his friend in his usual way. His Romany face showed that he was happy once again to be together with his friend on holiday, even behind the Berlin wall.

It was noticeable, as they walked on together, they were both overcome by a strange alien force. One that they could see subjected people to a political system that had not only patched up the buildings and shell holes around them, but were oppressive - totalitarian was the word used in the west - to all its citizens.

They both knew that, unlike on the other side of the wall, the people here had no control over their political masters. Or to put it more exactly: citizens here had no control over their own lives. Like most lads their age, they had heard and read many things about this

political system in East Germany, though like most of their friends back home, they had never encountered communism directly before.

What was that to them anyway; they were young; they were free, and they were on holiday. Like most day tourists in East Berlin they felt protected by the powers who governed them in the place where they came from. Not knowing where they were going, they relaxed as they ambled along.

Trying not to appear as if anything was wrong, Theo said blandly: "Bit chilly here is it not?"

At the top of the main road they turned left. Maurice did not say anything at first; he just smiled. His operation, Theo knew, had taken its toll on him and he had moments like this. What had been, and what was to be had shaken him to his core. He was trying to recover. You could see that just by looking at him.

Feeling tired, Maurice chuckled to his friend: "Theo let's look for a bar and taste the local beer."

Wherever they were it was definitely the main thoroughfare they were on. There was no doubt about that. They could see that from the large businesses dotted around on both sides of the street. There were many other small shops too: food stores and others that could not be defined by looking at them as to what they sold.

Just as they turned the corner onto another main thoroughfare, three young lads, who looked the same age as they were, came running over from the other side of the road. The tallest of the three, with a gaunt face, cropped black hair, stopped and spoke in a reasonable English accent to them: "I give you my address," he petitioned.

His friend, who was smaller, was even more anxious than him to communicate with the tourists. In an upbeat tone, he sang: "Send us jeans, T shirts, when you get back."

They seemed not to be too worried about anyone watching them. This was apparent when the smaller lad invited Theo and Maurice to a party later that night: "We have it in the graveyard, over there," he informed them, in a happy but sad tone, as he pointed to the grassy area, over the wall, across the road, "Bring some beer."

With that said, they moved off quickly in the direction of the train station they called Freideickstrasse, where Theo and Maurice had come from.

"Party in the graveyard," murmured Theo, raising an eyebrow, as they walked away.

Maurice who was always openminded about life, in his usual way made a joke of it all: "You fancy going?"

There was nothing else for it. In this strange depressing eastern sector, the two young men walked along and down to where they could see two soldiers were keeping guard outside what looked like an official guard house.

Just as they were passing by the frozen sentries, a man in a soft hat and long dark coat, going by the other way, could be heard saying in an American accent to his male companion: "Over there, that is where the book burning took place."

Theo looked across the road. He knew from reading about the Second World War the event he was talking about had taken place here in May 1933.

However, Maurice did not seem all that interested in what was being said. He had spotted something over

by the next group of buildings that interested him: "Look there is a bar over there," he said to Theo, and nodded in that direction.

After all, this was the business he was in. Maurice was not only here recovering from an operation, but he was here to get new ideas on how to promote his brand back home. Theo admired the way he made money. So, over they went and into the old bar just off the main road. For whatever reason no name was outside it, or if there was they could not see one.

There was nothing unusual about this drinking den to the two young Scotsmen. Many pubs in Glasgow looked just like this. The bar was filled with smoke, and with what looked like displaced people, standing around chatting, sitting here and there. After negotiating the punters, they somehow managed to get to a small bar, that had a traditional gantry, and there they bought themselves their first bottle of beer in East Germany.

After they moved away from the bar, one young fellow approached them, and once again they were given requests to send jeans to the address already written out for them. It was strange to them how these young fellows seemed desperate to do this, not knowing that back in the UK, Royal Mail had no affiliation behind the wall.

When they finished their beer they put the bottles down on an old dirty mahogany table, just opposite the bar, full of fag ends, fag burns, empty bottles and crushed cigarette packets. Theo said cautiously: "Think we should head back to the west now. What do you think?"

Even though it was an unbelievable adventure Maurice agreed; for this was not the glamorous holiday he was after either. Of course, they could tell their

friends when they got back home that they had been behind the wall, and that they knew would impress them no end. There was no doubt about it, the neons on the other side of the wall were calling them on.

Just before leaving the old boozier in East Berlin, a middle aged man came forward, out of the crowd. At first, Theo could not make him out. He seemed educated, but he was dressed like a down and out.

The place was so busy all the way up to the pub door that once away from the bar you could not really see anything other than bodies packed together. It was after all the only pub in this area.

The man dressed in a long dark gaberdine coat, who had an old bunnet on, came forward and took Theo's hand as if wanting to shake it. He said furtively, though in perfect English to him: "Take this card my friend, and remember the name on it. Someone will contact you," and with that he disappeared into the crowd again.

When Theo looked up after reading the card, Maurice laughed: "Think you have found a friend there, Theo."

Theo was not so sure. He looked back down at the white card in his hand. It had only one name on it: Topaz.

2. Meeting Freddie

22 October 2024. It was a nice late autumn day in the city of Glasgow. The crisp sunshine was blasting away all the imperfections that made the city drab, dark and gray. The lovely weather made it look as if Glasgow was part of the wider world again, where the sun always shines.

Anyone could see if they looked out of the train window, on the left hand side, how beautiful it all was. Yes, the colours from the trees: sycamore, oak, lime, horse chestnut and beech species were glorious, as they once again came to prominence after Pollokshaws West train station.

Pollok Country Park on the same side you could see was large, and not only that it had the great privilege of housing the Burrell Collection. Many visitors came here from all over the world to visit the museum. Yes, everything looked lovely today. It was definitely the last hurrah before the season of winter set in.

Theo got off the train at Central Station, and he walked along Gordon Street. He was heading for the main public library in Glasgow; this was right in the heart of the city.

The reason Theo was in town today was that he did not want to use his Internet at home. Most people nowadays understood they were being monitored from afar. It was a sensitive issue he was dealing with; he was sending all his personal details to his new employer.

Theo had been between jobs, as they say, since the summer. The interview with a media company, last week, had gone well. It was a good job offer he had received, and the position was in his home town of Glasgow. Theo was also sending a letter to his financial agent, who worked on the dark web, notifying him that he accepted their terms and conditions, and instructing him on how to invest his money, after the change in his circumstances.

Two days after the interview with his new employer, Clipe International Media Corporation, they officially offered him the position as editor in chief. They were part of the Cloaca Media group, who were at this time buying up media companies all over the UK.

There was nothing unusual about the kind of contract he had signed. Media companies were springing up during the night and disappearing during the day. No one seemed to notice, or even remember who they were. It was the way it was in the modern digital world. Theo hoped he would get at least a full year out of it - that was all he needed. He had a plan in his mind as to what he wanted to do after that.

At the library computer terminal in town, he signed in using his wife's library card. Just as he was about to

press the print button - to send copies by Royal Mail to his agent - a young lad approached him.

He had noticed this fellow early on talking to two other young men. They had been over in the extended section of the library. He knew that this was where the public could access more computers if the library was busy. Theo could see this young foreign looking lad who had come to sit by his computer terminal was in his early twenties, friendly and eager to talk to him. He was a mixture of Indian and English.

"I am so excited," said the young lad, and sat down on the vacant chair next to him.

He made no attempt to log on to the computer, but continued to address him, "I have to go down south to take part in an experiment; they are paying me fabulous amounts. Do you think I should do it?"

Theo noticed he said this as if life was all a great joke, and he was now very much part of it. Not to upset the young lad, he smiled and acknowledged his presence: "A Guinea pig, eh?"

"Yes," said the young lad shyly.

"Just about to send this to the printer. Hold on and you can tell me about it."

As Theo walked away to pick up his prints, he could not help but think about the connection between this fellow and the other two lads, that he had noticed earlier on with him. He reckoned the other lads had been at the other section, possibly using the Internet and for whatever reason they were just hanging around the library. However, there was something odd about the connection. The meeting looked staged to Theo.

Theo had once had an affair with a worker who was involved with the security services. She used to tell him - when she had a few drinks in the pub - about how their

agents were sent out to find out all sorts of strange things.

When Theo returned the young lad spoke to him again in the same upbeat manner as before: "It is in Manchester. Apparently, it is for a new wonder drug they are trying out. Can't believe they are paying me for doing this - over two thousand pounds."

"Guinea pigs are not cheap, especially for some new drug. Sounds interesting though, could be a good story for Clipse Media," replied Theo.

"You work there?" asked the young fellow.

Due to the fact the librarian was busy, Theo had to go back to the desk: "Still to pay for this," he excused himself.

Theo looked at the young lad, as he walked away and smiled. He could see the lad was typical of the new generation. However, he was not fashionable in dress, more of a classic style he had procured for himself that never goes out of fashion: formal black coat worn in a casual style, and just the right length of long dark hair over his ears. He was the type of lad who was universal in everything. No origin, no culture, a know-all who had become an actor on the public stage. He was a ham actor, the kind though that actually gets somewhere due to persistence.

Theo was himself always formally dressed in a suit and tie. So, they had something in common. Theo was intrigued, for he could see there was more to this lad than met the eye.

When he got back to his terminal, the young lad was still there waiting for him: "What's your name?" asked Theo, as he folded his prints and put them in his shoulder bag.

“Freddie Fadalla,” chirped the lad, then got right back into his story “Do you think I should go for the drug trial? The money is too good to miss?”

However, as Freddie unpacked the offer, he let slip his guard: “What do you think Theo, should I do it?”

Immediately after saying this he realised his mistake: for Theo had never mentioned his name. Freddie hurried on with his story: “They have offered me a hotel for three nights, and all my meals are paid for. Even if I have to stay longer - they will cover everything.”

When he asked Theo what his name was a few moments later, of course Theo could have mentioned the indiscretion, but he realised there and then that young Freddie was a plant. Something jugged out, and was not right. Even the two other lads, and the way they had interacted with each other from a long distance appeared abnormal.

Just then the two other lads, who he could see were a bit older than Freddie, made their way out of the library.

Not long after this, Theo shut down his computer and walked out of the library with his new found friend, Freddie Fadalla, the young street actor as he thought of him now.

They both went up the stairs and into the entrance of the art gallery above. Tourists were always standing here taking pictures of the spiral balcony, and today was no different. They both had to stop and wait for the snappers to finish. After a few moments when the path was clear they made their way past the happy tourists, and those who were coming into the gallery to see the latest exhibition by some unknown London artist.

When they got outside, what was the old tobacconist building, the two other lads who had been chatting to Freddie were standing there, as if waiting for him: "Ah, there's that happy chappie," said one to the other, looking at Freddie.

Theo could see that they of course were connected to him now after meeting him in the library, and they greeted each other accordingly, as new friends do.

It was after all a universal decree to do this when you were with someone who is extremely friendly like Freddie Fadalla. Or was it? Was he a spook? There was something odd about it.

Seeing the older man with their young friend, the two fellows introduced themselves to Theo, saying they were from Oregon, and over here in Scotland for a holiday. He noticed they did not have much of a foreign accent.

Everyone chatted about the way of the world and the time they were living in. As they were unpacking the economic climate for both residents and tourists, a girl appeared out of the crowd and shouted: "Freddie!" and came over to greet him like a dear friend.

Freddie smiled on seeing her and left the group and went forward and spoke with her. This left the two American lads from the state of Oregon to chat with the newly appointed editor of Clipe Media. In a parked van across the road a man could be seen taking photographs of those coming out of the library.

Theo, prior to this new appointment with this publishing company, had been a well known journalist. Feeling that they were not what they said they were, the editor of Clipe drew them to the title of a book, still on sale in the shops. This was a book he had written a few years ago about the Second World War. A business

card was then duly taken from inside his jacket pocket and handed over.

“The war story I wrote is on the Kindle, as well as other platforms. If you are lucky you will be able to grab a hard copy in the main bookshop in town.”

Theo knew the website on the card would direct them to where they could purchase the book. He added with a teasing smile: “There is a special offer on at the moment,” and after a pregnant pause added, “Discounted for all Internet readers in Oregon, of course.”

While Freddie was away, Theo got the impression the young ham actor was - to put it mildly - wanting to be his friend and possibly more than that.

The two older lads from Oregon, who looked as if they had been in the army or police, had a coldness about them. Tourists he knew no matter how sceptical about the world around them had a natural reaction to natives when they were spoken to. They certainly were not happy sightseers. There was no doubt about it, to his media eye, they had had military training.

When Freddie returned, the sales pitch from the author came to an end with the two lads from Oregon. It was their turn to speak now. One said: “I read, prior to coming to Glasgow, about an old building with a water tower designed by a famous artist, and that is where we are heading for next.”

Trying to help, the young Guinea pig turned and asked: “Do you know where that is, Theo?”

Freddie was not just an ham actor, Theo could see he was a spy who had not so much come in from the cold, but from the secondary school, no doubt acting now on behalf of some company, state, or an individual.

After they walked together away from the Gallery of Modern Art, Theo turned left at Wellington's statue, away from the library, in the direction of Queen Street station. He noticed his new found friend followed him.

And as they walked on, the young lad asked the editor for his email address. Theo gave him one that he did not use. This was one where all the Facebook and Twitter messages ended up that he never read.

As Freddie quickly created a new contact in his iPhone, he said in a trained polite voice: "Can I buy the editor of Clipe Media a coffee over there," and pointed to the Pret A Manger cafe across the way.

Theo made it known he was turning left again, this time in the opposite direction from his companion. He smiled at the young spook: "Freddie, busy at the moment - see you later," and walked smartly round the corner and onto St Vincent Street.

As he walked on, looking back at the episode in his mind, Theo said to himself: "Too well choreographed if you ask me..."

The new editor of Clipe Media, like many other editors these days, knew he could have been followed into the library and hit there: "But what were they after?" he wondered.

He remembered someone on the radio that morning on a chat show saying there were lots of agencies these days now in Glasgow who would work for anyone. 'They will dig anything up about you and sell it to the cheapest bidder.'

Another caller had spoken in a funny pious voice, as if he was a preacher. 'That is true, what the last caller said, social crucifixions are happening every day now in life. With everything digitalised, everything can

be compromised. All you have to do is switch on your computer and you are doomed...'

Theo Rosenberg could not care less about what the moaners and groaners said to radio presenters in the morning, or at any other time. "Who knows what they are up to," he said out loud to himself, as he crossed over onto Buchanan Street, "In a year, I will be out of here."

3. Remembering Topaz

The next day in town walking down Buchanan Street, Theo noticed the young lad Freddie Fadalla coming towards him. He would have let him pass, but at the last minute Freddie spotted him. Theo wondered if this was again coincidental. He was convinced now that Freddie was working for an agency who were setup to infiltrate a citizen for payment. The young street actor did not seem to notice him at first. Was Freddie alerted at the last minute by someone in his ear saying: 'Target approaching,' he wondered.

They had such sophisticated equipment these days, not only to track you; they could watch you on your computer working wherever you were, and listen in via your phone, even when it was switched off. Theo knew the spooks liked to follow up their adventures and close off any relationship, that is if they could not keep it going in a natural way. He knew that it was after this that they drifted back into the shadows. All encounters at all times had to appear natural to the person they

were targeting. He learnt this from his old girlfriend Stella. He remembered her saying to him once: "Theo, you should be careful; they have a file on everyone, you know."

In 2024, it really was a time when The Lives of Others had come to life. This is why Theo had turned to making his pile. He wanted out. Theo was only interested in making money and getting out of the cyber malaise, everyone had found themselves in. He not only wanted to get away from the surveillance state, but he wanted to get away from his boring wife and dysfunctional teenage daughter too.

"Theo how are you?," said Freddie the street spook, then there was a pause.

The conversation that followed meandered for a time in generalities, then ended up where Freddie wanted it to go, namely where he was going: "I am heading home. I live with my mother," he let the editor know, then out came another imponderable, "She sometimes hits me, you know," and he stared at the editor, as if waiting for a reaction.

"Really."

He was vague about where he stayed, and why she hit him. Freddie, the street actor, as if to entertain the new editor of Clipe Media, went on in a cheery tone: "I must be crazy - mental health," he said pointing to his head, and laughed the way boys do.

Theo could not imagine an older woman battering him around the room. Once more he began to wonder about this. It seemed implausible. First the vulnerable lad acting as a Guinea pig, then revealing that he was vulnerable, in a place of safety. Not only that but getting beat up by his mother.

Just as they were about to leave each other another vague offer came forth from the young street actor: "Theo, remember the coffee offer still stands." Freddie advanced.

For Theo he was too young to make that kind of remark to a man who was just about to retire. Just before they departed Freddie, the street actor, looked at him wonderingly then, from out of his dark crombie coat pocket, he handed Theo a card. Shyly the young spook said to the editor of Clipe Media: "I think you will remember this."

Theo took the white business card in his hand, and he looked down at it. There was only one name on it: Topaz.

Suddenly, it all came flooding back to him: meeting the man in a bar in East Germany in 1984. What was he to make of it all?

That night in bed, Theo wondered aloud to himself: "Why have they waited 40 years to contact me?"

Due to all the problems with surveillance in the modern world, Theo wrote his personal thoughts down, not in a computer, but in an old fashioned diary. He had done this for a few years now. He knew the spooks and crooks could not read his thoughts there. No matter where he was, Theo always carried his diary with him wherever he went. At night, he left it on his bedside table; for he always woke up and ideas came to him. He liked to refer to his notes in the morning and keep, time, dates, and places, that would assist him in his quest to escape the world around him.

"A man I met in Berlin, behind the wall, named Topaz has made contact with me, through a street spook who goes by the name Freddie Fadalla. It is not clear what

they want?" he wrote down that night before turning over again.

Theo did not sleep for a while. He lay looking at the wall; he knew on the other side of it was his wife Ann lying there in her single bed cuddling her dementia Barbie doll. She was typical of a fifty-five year old woman: lost in a world where Eve had no longer any reference to Adam.

4. Interesting stories

Strangely, the next day his night thoughts were brought into perspective at the breakfast table by an email that popped up in his in tray:

Hi Theo,

Fancy a meet up in town today?

Same place. I will be in the library again round about midday.

Your local hero

Freddie Fadalla

Theo was so intrigued by it all that he went along and met the young street spook, as he now called him. And once more while he was working away on the computer at the library, he noticed over towards his left hand side a young lad in a dark coat, this time coming

out of the shadows from the cafe bar. Once again this young lad sat down on the seat next to him.

The computer section was never busy these days. Businesses were finding it difficult to recruit people, and job seekers did not need to use the library that much for printouts, or flight tickets. With the economy on hold, as one pundit put it, not many people were flying abroad for work these days.

Moreover, in the year 2024, most folks had access to the Internet and did not have to use the library in town for emailing, or buying things online. It was well known that there were plenty of free hotspots near and far, if the consumer didn't have a connection at home.

Right away Freddie introduced the name of the man Theo had met many years ago: "I spoke with Topaz."

"So how is he?" asked the new editor of Clipe Media, in an upbeat tone.

On hearing the connection was live now Freddie smiled like a schoolboy, and immediately swung into his trained professional mode: "When you were behind the wall, you must have made a good impression on him."

"Does he have a real name?" asked Theo smiling, as he continued to type away inserting another word into the search engine Google. "I am looking for the house my old mate Dave lives in. He phoned me the other night to tell me that he has just built a new house over it. Made a pile of money in remainder books did Dave."

Freddie keen to get to know the man he was sitting next to asked him: "Do you still see him?"

"Dave, no. He moved down south years ago. Just look at this area here - filthy rich. Where is it he lives again. I am sure it is along here somewhere," Theo muttered as he moved the curser along the country

road called Smuggler's alley. "Ah, here we are; this is Dave's house."

Getting back on track, Freddie calmly mentioned: "Topaz sends his best wishes."

Just as he said this a lovely picture came into view of a modern house along Smuggler's lane, Bosham, East Sussex: "Quite impressive, don't you think?"

"Is that it?"

"Yes, Dave's new pad. Looks quite the job," said Theo openly, as if to someone who knew him.

Freddie knew that silence was not in his favour: "Topaz knows that you have got the job with Clipe Media company here in Glasgow. He has asked me to keep in touch with you."

"Well, Freddie as editor of Clipe Media, you can tell him I am open to receiving copy from all interesting sources."

"Topaz can certainly offer you interesting stories, as well as information about people near and far."

Amazed that after all those years they had traced and tracked him, and now made contact, Theo quickly spoke his lines: "Yes, I have started with Clipe Media, should be interesting. It has certainly given me something to think about."

Theo turned from the picture of Dave's house on the computer screen, and he smiled at the young spook sitting next to him. He could see the young lad, although a ham actor, had been trained on how to speak and act when meeting with clients.

The interesting thing was although Freddie was young his innocence he could not hide, and this gave him away, even when he was not looking directly at who he was speaking to. Not all young lads his age were like this. The majority wanted to be aloof, but most young

lads his age lacked experience, and invariably this made them reveal their motives, not long after engaging with them.

Theo was an old dog, he could see the wheels of his handler at work in this young fellow. However, Mr Topaz, or whoever it was that was controlling him, had not killed off the child within Freddie, yet. He feared the worst though for him. It would not be long for them to do that. Theo knew they were recruiting them young these days in the secret service.

“Who are you working for?” This intrigued the new editor of Clipe Media? “Is it the Russians, the Chinese maybe, the British?” he wondered.

With Russia still at war with Ukraine, and China spreading her wings, things were well not what they used to be. Theo knew that much. It was hard to define the enemy these days. Everyone in the media knew that.

Theo could see that due to all the things that had happened to him thus far in life, he had no affiliation to anyone anymore - not even his own country. At the great age of sixty four, he was most definitely out for himself. He had once been an Anglophile, but not anymore. He was a man who wanted to get out of surveillance UK, or whatever they called it these days. Theo Rosenberg was keen to make enough money so that he could retire somewhere exotic. In that way he was just like Paul Gauguin and Robert Louis Stevenson.

“Ok, how should we meet?” he asked the young lad beside him.

“I will run it by Topaz and will be in touch with you via email,” answered the young spook and with that he was gone.

5. Theo the Rock Star

As they sat together at the breakfast table, Theo made a joke of his latest predicament to his wife Ann. “Fancy going to Moscow for a holiday?”

Ann, as usual, was completely immersed in the morning chat show on the new flat screen tv, she had bought just the other week.

Now that it was installed inside the kitchen on the wall she stared at it morning, noon, and night. After a minute or so she looked over at him as if he was a lodger. She heard Theo all right, but she ignored him. Sitting crossed legged on the chair by the breakfast bar, moments later she smirked: “You go, and let me know how you get on...”

It was a dull dreik day as they say in Scotland, and just like it his new Porsche 911 had still to be delivered. It was coming tomorrow. Theo Rosenberg had no other option but to take the train again today. Sitting at breakfast reading his new book he had downloaded the

night before: 'The Last ditch', he got ready for the day ahead.

He had always been fascinated by the Germans, and when he came across a book about how the Third Reich had plans to conquer Britain, he purchased it right away. The book he bought was written by David Lampe and Garry Sheffield.

Before he had finished the first chapter he could see that it certainly gave the reader an insight into how another country planned not only to conquer Britain, but how the natives were going to carryout guerrilla warfare against the occupying forces when they arrived.

Just as he was turning into another chapter on his Kindle an email popped up on his device:

Please meet our friend tomorrow in the gallery of Modern Art in the city centre. He will be carrying a Harrods shopping bag.

Theo knew that the gallery of Modern Art was situated above the library where just the other day he had met the young spook Freddie Fadalla.

It was not obvious from the email who the man was he had to meet. That got Theo thinking. He took out his diary and wrote in it:

Could it be Topaz? And if so, will I recognise him?

Now all Theo had was the memory of a down and out man in a gabardine coat standing talking to him in an East German bar.

As Theo got ready to head for the Gallery of Modern Art, he began thinking about working for the Russians.

He wondered if he would end up like George Blake living in Russia. His preferred option though was lying on a beach on some south sea paradise.

For something to do he typed into his computer under safe search. Are Muscovites friendly? Back came the answer: Muscovites actually help others.

Still annoyed at the thought about the mysterious figure wanting to meet him, Theo wondered if he should write back to Freddie and say something funny to him like: 'Can you not send a blonde along instead.'

Humour was a great leveller, but in today's PC world, he knew it was safer to not say anything funny. Everything was controversial these days. Jokes were for those who did not want to get on in society.

Theo knew in any case talk like that was old fashioned and frowned upon by the Woke majority in business and commerce. Now in the everything goes world of 2024, the best you could do was avoid being controversial about anything.

It was true you were only accepted in modern society if you believed in nothing and accepted everything. After all that was what was broadcast every day on the Internet, as well as the tv. Nothing could be levied against you if you kept your thoughts to yourself.

Theo knew that those who acted like this were hiding themselves from the world. Nine out of ten polite conversations he reckoned were just covering some hidden agenda. People were just like him out for themselves. It was a strange world now. Kids had no tradition to follow; they were like aimless beings wandering through a digital paradise.

Oftentimes the old days would come back to Theo, especially when he heard seventies rock songs. They did indeed cast up his youthful spirit once again.

At night he listened to his old albums on YouTube, mainly Thin Lizzie tracks, and he drifted back with them to a time when he had a different girl just about every other night. He loved Thin Lizzy.

He could see himself once more at the bar with his mates in town. The Vega bar was the place they all used to go to. Yes, at one time Theo had been a bit of a lad. He was right into the rock scene then.

Way back then during the day working in the estate agents in town, he was your normal nine to five guy, but at night as soon as he left the office, Theo Rosenberg would go home and get his Wrangler gear on. The joke was the nine to five man in the evening once dressed in jeans became an international rock star, hip shaker, and friend of the stars. He was welcomed to every party, bar, or rock club. This was of course a long time before the pandemic and he met his wife.

At home he was not that daft to open that world up to his wife Ann in conversation. She knew nothing of his old vinyl days. In today's political correct world he knew that if you wanted to keep your wife you had to act like a lawyer. Any indiscretion would be jumped on, and if you replied to anything controversial, you would be named a bully or misogynist, or even worst a Chauvinist. This would soon lead to you being excluded from others even through your family connections. Best not to joke about anything was the general rule of thumb for professional men in the year 2024.

Theo looked over at his wife. He knew she loved wandering around in her dressing gown until midday, then she would meet her pals that she used to work

with in the accounts office. They would then all head to the gym. They never ever worked out though. It was the cafe bar restaurant they went to, for it was: “Simply to good to miss!” was how she always put it when she came home.

“What was that chick called, I used to pull at the Vega club: Halloween! That’s right. Goodness me she was always up for it. ‘Ok Theo baby!’ You can be my lover boy...”

As he sipped his morning coffee, Theo knew he would have to act sensible and see what this man wanted, and moreover if Topaz would agree to his fee.

One thing about Theo Rosenberg; he was not shy when it came to telling others how much his services would cost then. He knew that much about this life: money was a great leveller.

6. Meeting the contact

Theo was up early for his appointment. This time he drove his new Carmine Red Porsche 911 along the motorway, and when he got to the city, he parked it in the high rise carpark, halfway down Mitchell Street.

It was a reasonable morning. Although the sun came through the overcast sky, there would be rain sometime today. Generally it would be dry though that was the forecast. Theo walked from the carpark straight through Mitchell Lane to the Gallery of Modern Art. It only took a few minutes to get to Royal Exchange Square. This area for Theo always had a Death in Venice feeling about it: millionaires going into well known restaurants, as the down and outs sat under the archways. He had written about this in his diary, just last week:

Nothing has really changed in Glasgow since I was a boy. The rich and poor still view each other under the arches: some walk to be fed, as others sit and beg.

Theo liked scribbling his thoughts down when they came to him. He fancied writing another novel. Like many others, at the end of each year he always looked back and wondered at what had been.

Feeling good he ambled along and once again found himself outside the Gallery of Modern Art. Just like the other morning, the electric door opened. Theo smiled at the member of staff standing inside who was on duty. It was obvious this young lady on the door today was trying to keep away from the draft coming in from the street.

Notwithstanding that, she happily stepped forward into view, and in a trained voice welcomed the visitor: "Good morning. sir. Are you here for the exhibition in the gallery?" asked the bright young thing.

Theo wasn't sure what she meant, so he smiled at her: "Yes, thank you. Upstairs isn't?"

Theo walked forward, went up the three flights of stairs and headed over to the window, on the far side of the gallery. Knowing that the view from here looked back across at the cafe bars in the direction of St Vincent Street and, that this was the place he had to meet his contact, he relaxed. There he sat down on a little wooden bench in front of a ledge.

Once settled, he took out his iPhone, clicked on the FT app. Presently, he started reading an article about Germany, and how it was still dependent on China, and how although doing well was short of labour.

Moments later, after he had finished reading, a man with an Italian style cap, dressed in a dark coat, and light coloured flannel trousers, appeared in the gallery and walked towards him.

However, the stranger when he got near to him stopped and turned and faced the opposite way. With his back to him, Theo could see that he was now facing the painting on the faraway wall. For a few moments, the new editor of Clipe International Media watched him. The strange man put his Harrods shopping bag down on the floor, then he stared at the abstract painting on the wall.

Theo slowly put away his mobile device back into his suit pocket, got up and went over and joined him. As he stood beside the man, there was a long silence, then the voice beside him came to life. In a cultured low tone, the strange man said: "The painting here by Dimitri Vrubel is called My God, Help me to survive this Deadly Love."

"Yes, I can see that," said Theo looking at the man's side profile.

The man's round face turned and he looked at Theo, then he went back and stared at the painting in front of him again. His profile told the editor of Clipe nothing other than he liked food and drink.

Theo thought about what to say next. The only thing that impressed upon his senses was the side portrait of an unfit man wearing an Italian cap. He would need to remember that for his diary. Certainly his double chin and grey stubble made him uninteresting.

"Mr Rosenberg we believe you have taken up the appointment to be the next editor of Clipe International. And we hear also that you are going to be launching a free newspaper in the city soon called the Messenger. This will happen next month, I am told by my sources."

Theo looked back at the painting and knowing how daft it could get with unscrupulous agents, he replied: "That is correct."

"You have a nice office in Bath Street, and a team has already been assembled for you to work with: four young graduates, all keen to make their mark, no doubt."

"Yes, it is all going to plan at the moment."

"I am sure it is, Mr Rosenberg. When is the launch date of the new Messenger?"

"The first Monday of the new month."

"I see."

Keen to keep the stranger engaged, Theo added as he looked once again from the painting to the man beside him: "Thereafter, it will go out every day in the city as a freesheet. Advertisers will pay for its costs. Our online Clipe international media website I am sure will continue to make a profit when I am there, and we will be able to sponsor the new Messenger title."

"I believe you are looking for journalists - to keep the advertisers happy."

"I certainly hope we can get a few more in."

"I am led to believe, the Clipe website under your authority will become essentially a whistle-blowing news site, along with the new freesheet the Messenger: exposing people who are up to no good."

"You are well informed, sir."

"Mr Rosenberg, we will be quite discreet with the stories we offer you."

"Quite," said Theo quietly.

Prior to this meeting, Theo had typed into the most popular search engine on the Internet: average salary for an editor in the UK. There was to be a final meeting to thrash out the terms and conditions of his salary

soon. The answer came back £45,493 per year. He asked for £50.000, and he was confident of getting that.

“Are you happy with your salary?”

From an early age Theo had learnt to ask for the ultimate in life, as he put it. He had no scruples. He would work for anyone, and up to a point do anything to get what he wanted.

What was it to him if the Russians, or the Chinese got involved in spreading fake news in the country he was working and living in, bankrolled by whoever. He could not care less who Topaz was. Theo was only interested in the Clipe Media news site, and the new title the Messenger freesheet, and publish their stories.

“We will pay you well, Mr Rosenberg”

“Yes, I am interested in working with companies who are offering interesting stories - absolutely,” he said in a relaxed tone.

Money was Theo’s thing and this man if he did not know that before; he would soon find out. Theo loved money. He loved dealing with it. His history in business was not complicated to understand.

Anyone researching him would soon see that Theo had always bought expensive cars, and when travelling abroad, he always stayed in the best hotels. When he did not get lucky at the bar, it was the best prostitute in town he would commission. Theo loved the company of beautiful women, and he would spend money on them without any real understanding of what they wanted, or what he wanted from them.

From a young age, Theo had learnt that having money made others subordinate to him - well for a time, anyway. Of course, while working away from home his wife, Ann, knew nothing of his adventures.

“Very good. We will be in touch, Mr Rosenberg.” came the almost mocking reply. “I will relay your thoughts to Topaz that you are interested, and we will keep in touch with you via young Freddie.”

And with that the thin man with the double chin, grey stubble, cropped black hair, dark coat, and light coloured flannel trousers, and Italian cap, was gone.

As a stranger he arrived, and as a stranger he was no more. Theo sat back down on the little wooden seat by the window again. This meeting was so strange that it was duly inserted into his diary right away that he always carried with him.

Met the contact at midday in the Gallery of Modern Art - possibly from the Balkans or Eastern Europe. But who is he working for?

Theo after rereading his latest entry screwed up his face and looked over at the painting again on the faraway wall: “Yes, that’s the way they operate,” he whispered under his breath.

However, as he put his diary back into his suit pocket, he thought again about the man’s voice. He had heard it all before, of course, when he worked in London: ‘We will be in touch, Mr Rosenberg.’

Theo’s feelings, however, changed knowing that a connection had now been made to increase his income. He smiled to himself as he sat there on the little wooden seat.

After a few moments of reflection, Theo turned and looked out of the window, and for a moment or two he watched the man, he had just met, walk past the coffee shop, opposite the gallery, and then disappear up the

lane by the hairdressers salon. He knew that would take him out onto St Vincent Street and on to wherever.

Once outside the gallery, Theo looked up at the statue of the Duke of Wellington. A group of what looked like Spanish tourists were taking pictures of it. There was nothing unusual about that.

He once again checked his favourite investors app. This time the bond market. "Yes, Bonds are looking good," he muttered to himself. "A few extra payments once a month will do me very nicely indeed. I will soon be out of here thank you very much."

It was not a problem these days: dividends could be payed to the client wherever he was. And they were quite good for the kind of adventure he was planning. This along with investing his pension in an offshore account seemed right for him. He knew companies could send out money to anonymous accounts to wherever and from there to where he was living in the world at that moment.

Later that day, after consulting someone online in the dark financial world, Theo set up an international bank account. After he completed it, his mood changed.

When he was between decisions the staff could see he was moody. With a clear vision again of the future, he brightened up. Cynthia, who was still hanging around the Lomond suite after the meeting looked over at him. Everyone in the office could see he was happy.

"Have you ever been to Vietnam. Cindy?"

"Oh ,duck cheap, boss," she reported, looking up from her small personal computer. "I was there many years ago, just after I left school."

Theo, before the others came back in for the afternoon session, openly wondered: "Can you really live there on next to nothing."

Cynthia always one to accent the positive: “Great place to retire, boss.”

7. Jason the Big Wig

The following week, Theo arrived earlier than usual to start work at Clipe Media. He knew that Jason Macintyre was paying him a visit today. He had got a text from him the week before informing the new editor that he would be coming along: “To tidy up loose ends,” was how the executive put it in his email.

Theo’s research told him that Jason Macintyre was a live wire who had worked down south for most of his career. Jason, who was Scottish, he read with interest had worked with well known media companies in London and New York. This was at the same time as when Theo was in the old smoke. However, Theo could not remember him. It was obvious that he was being sent back up north by the owners of Clipe Media to Glasgow to see how the new editor was getting on, and no doubt give him some advice on the launch of the new freesheet: The Messenger.

Theo also found out online that he was married to a French lady, and they were living in London. They had

also recently bought a house in the west end of Glasgow in Hyndland. There was nothing unusual about that. Many professional people looked ahead and did this sort of thing.

That morning inside the Bath Street office of Clipe Media, Theo waited with the security man Bill. As he stood there behind the small reception desk, Theo stared out through the large window onto Bath Street, and as he did so he remembered his first thoughts when he had stepped inside the Clipe office a month ago.

He said as much to the security man: "You know, Bill, when I came here at first, I thought I was in the wrong place."

Bill the security man as ever was mundane with the extraordinary: "Yes sir, most people think it is a boutique hotel we have here."

"You are right there Bill. Just last week workers visiting our neighbours Mikros, on the second floor, said the very same thing."

Theo related to Bill what the visitor, the other day when he walked by him, said to his colleague: "Wait to you see the toilets in here. You will think you are in a spaceship."

Five minutes later a taxi pulled up outside the Clipe Media organisation, and a middled aged executive got out of the electric taxi vehicle. He was dressed in a smart dark suit, had short hair, slightly greying and receding at the sides. As if knowing he was being watched through the window, and waited on, the man trotted up the stairs like a premier or president to meet a foreign diplomat or government official.

As soon as he arrived at the small reception desk, after a handshake, with the newly appointed editor,

Theo gave Jason an update on how things were going at Clipe Media.

In a low cultured good humoured voice, Theo put forward the following: “I believe that now that our country is in turmoil, people need the media more than ever to keep them up to date on what is going on. And here at Clipe Media we intend to do just that...”

Jason smiled hearing his editor’s comments: “Yes, some folks say it is back to the good old days. Interesting times Theo, is it not, for those in the media.”

Seeing Jason looking over at the copy of the painting of the Reverend Robert Walker, popularly known as The Skating Minister, Theo smiled to himself; for he had bought this just the other day. He asked for it to be put where there was a space on the wall opposite the lounge suite.

With an open hand, The editor ushered the director forward into the newly purpose built Lomond suite, over to his left hand side.

Jason, who had been part of the design team that had designed the interior of this new office, nodded. Theo could see just by looking at him, he was very proud of what they had achieved.

Knowing he would always be associated with the new office, Jason was not shy about this: “The philosophy behind the design of this building here was that the atmosphere should neither be welcoming nor intimidating to any visitor,” the executive told the editor.

Theo knew the corporate world hid as much as it could, so that they could spread their wings unnoticed. As a media man, he knew to be part of the everyday world you had to remain allusive to dominate the masses. Over the years the interior fashion of corporate

buildings of course changed, but to those in the know the secret world of international finance always had to remain hidden.

Theo had been in many such offices like this and, now that his initial period was over here at Clipe Media, he was not all that impressed by it. Of course, he could not say that to his boss.

In any case Theo always guarded his thoughts when he was with fellow executives: "Everything is looking good - very nice indeed," he said in a bright breezy tone.

In his anglicised Scottish accent, Jason beamed back: "Yes Theo, the shareholders are happy what we are doing here," and as he looked around him at the open planned suite added: "Very nice, indeed."

Theo smiled and beckoned him to go forward inside the Lomond suite: "The board room is just the right size too for our production team," he told the chief executive.

"We thought we should call it the Lomond suite - it means beacon. Did you know that, Theo?"

"I did," he lied and gave a nod. "It is always a lively session when we meet for our daily reports in here."

"Yes, this is where we thought it best for the editor to meet and plan the forthcoming editions of Clipe Media."

Not long after they had stepped inside, Jason got out his mobile - the latest iPhone of course. However, as soon as he looked at it, he seemed distracted.

Theo moved away from him and said: "If you are ready, Jason, I will get Bill the steward to bring in the others to meet you."

"Yes, pleased do Theo." Jason replied without looking up.

Soon the man from London was sitting in Theo's seat at the top of the long oak table. Theo was sure this was a deliberate move, but he showed no sign of knowing that.

"Now where is that text from head office," muttered Jason to himself, as he stared at his iPhone.

Theo had learnt over the years, at business meetings and other gatherings, to say as little as possible to both management and staff. And that was even before they had started. 'Familiarity breeds contempt in all walks of life,' he wrote down in his financial diary at the beginning of every year.

The steward who was with him at the reception desk had been standing in the corridor hanging around waiting for a call. When he heard Theo say: "Ok, Bill, bring them in," he went straight into action: "Very good sir; I will get them."

Theo was out and back in the Lomond suite before Jason had found what he was looking for on his iPhone. As soon as Theo came back in to the suite his eyes fixed for some reason on the conference table. He had never noticed how impressive the solid natural wood looked before; it seemed to dominate the whole space around it. He tapped it twice as if to confirm his thoughts.

Theo knew the owners of Clipe Media corporation - their official title - had not spared any money even on the furnishings, or the decor.

Money of course impressed Theo and knowing he was around people who had lots of it, the future to him looked interesting. Even though he had other ideas of his own, Theo hid his yearning to live out life for the rest of his life on some beach somewhere. Sitting down where Cynthia usually sat, the editor waited for the editorial team to arrive.

No doubt there would be a prep talk by Jason the chief executive about the company, along the lines of how hard work will always be rewarded with large bonuses by the corporation, if targets are met by the staff.

It was certainly a good atmosphere when they had editorial meetings in here. Yes, the Clipe corporation was doing well in a difficult climate. Theo could not argue with that.

It was normal that in the boardroom, after the day's agenda was covered, for others to speak about what they were up to in life. Today's meeting, however, would be different though.

Theo could see himself here in this office for at least a year. He was going to enjoy himself in this era of culture confusion, subterfuge, and aimless living. Plenty of brown envelopes he could see coming his way from foreign agencies. This would enhance his pension and his proposed trip to the far east.

Theo knew all sorts of people and agencies were wanting to get their message out. He would see to it that that was indeed the case; for a reasonable payment, of course.

The editor smiled at the executive who was sitting comfortably in his seat at the top of the table. Jason looked like someone who enjoyed flying visits. A flash and dash man if ever there was one.

Theo did look around the room once or twice, but there was nothing of interest in it other than the screen projector for video calls behind where he usually sat.

So, the editor waited at the door for his team to arrive into the Lomond suite, and as he did he dreamed about what he would do with all the money he was

going to make from the Clipe Corporation, in more ways than one.

Even though another sat in his chair Theo Rosenberg knew the editor's seat was his for at least a year. He could see himself there leaning back going through some Zen thoughts, before speaking to his colleagues about how important it was to get good copy from all sorts of sources.

Theo knew there would be times where he would have to lay down the law to his editorial staff, but normally he was laid back as the old saying goes. Theo Rosenberg, media man of old, knew how to lead men and women. Every year he wrote down his secret in his diary: 'Never let them get to know what your thinking.'

The two men waited for the Clipe Media staff to arrive. Jason came off his mobile phone; he too looked down along the boardroom table at its impressive form. As if for something to say, the high flying executive at that moment looked up and wondered: "Am I sitting in your chair, Theo?"

Theo could see through his professional manner. He was quite relaxed about this. The editor turned and smiled back at him. Theo for a moment thought of replying: "No booked seats in here," but refrained from doing so.

There was obviously a delay in the staff getting to the Lomond suite, so Theo thought he would ask the man they sent up from London about the company they were both working for: "Jason, who are the owners of Clipe Media?"

Jason sighed, leaned back, and in an honest tone answered him: "To tell you the truth, Theo, I don't really know. My wages are always paid into my bank. I have no complaints with that, and I ask no questions."

Wondering what was keeping the others, Theo looked towards the door, then he said in a cheerful tone: “Yes, the company have certainly pulled out all the stops kitting out this place, haven’t they?”

Jason, still smarting from being behind said project, beamed: “Absolutely, one of the most trendiest places in the city to work.”

Keeping the conversation going Theo asked him: “Jason, do they have fingers in other pies?”

“I am not sure. What is known is that they are a consortium. I hear things of course, but I am not sure who they all are. All I know is that they are a group of foreign investors that have city connections. The only contact we have with them is via a young lad named Freddie Fadalla. You have met him, of course. Haven’t you?”

“Oh, yes, I have met young Freddie. I wonder how he is getting on at the clinic?”

“Clinic! Is he having problems?”

“He was heading for Manchester, he was telling me, when I first met him, as a Guinea pig for some new drug.”

Jason only knew him via the consortium and said as much: “He is always on the phone to me. Nice young lad, but got to say he phones me at the strangest times.”

When nothing was said to this, Jason moved the flower bowl slightly to be in the centre of the conference table.

Theo knew Freddie was a spook of course: “Yes, he can be over bearing, can’t he.”

The chief executive, sensing the newly appointed editor had more insight than he originally thought, smiled at him.

After another long pause, Theo thought he had better say something about himself and his relationship with young Freddie Fadalla, who obviously had connections with the Clipe Media corporation: "Well, he has already setup a meeting with me and an interesting contact who offers blogs and wiretap stories. I am not surprised he delivers all the messages from the investors to you. He seems well connected. I take it you, like me, follow the safety procedure these days using written notes, due to the threat of data breach over the Internet."

"It is a real problem, Theo, is it not?" sympathised the executive.

Just then, Bill the security man appeared in his dark uniform and although the Lomond suite door was open he knocked it and after one loud chap, he sang: "That's the team ready for the meeting, sir."

On hearing him say this Jason switched off his mobile phone, and Theo standing by the door instructed the security man: "Ok Bill, show them in."

"Now, I can finally get to meet the executive team of journalists we have here at the Clipe corporation," exclaimed the man from London, rubbing his hands together.

Presently, two middle aged females, appeared. Then a man behind them with cropped dark hair; his was the only serious face. The ladies looked happy enough telling whoever looked their way that they were living the dream here at Clipe Media in this fantastic new office.

Jason got up, walked forward as Theo introduced the executive to his team, as they all shuffled in: "This is Jason Macintyre the regional manager of Clipe

International Media corporation,” he said in an official tone, as they all trooped in.

The three media bloggers had never seen Theo so official before, and they all just stared at him as he continued speaking.

“Sam is experienced in all that is happening in the commercial aspects within our city. Always in touch with entrepreneurs and executives is Sam. Anyone who wants the latest business news goes straight to her blog.”

On hearing this Sam, from being passive rushed into life, and pushed her bobbed red hair back that was cut in a page style. As her sallow hand came forward from her side, she smiled at the stranger in the hot seat and said in an undertone: “Please to meet you,” but no more.

“Please to meet you too, Sam.”

Jason seeing no opportunity to say anything else quickly turned to her colleague standing next to her

Theo seeing this interjected: “This is Cynthia, who is our roving reporter in live music and the arts scene. We only need one entertainment blogger in here - and we have got the best!”

Cynthia beamed. The executive could see she was good looking, middle aged and unlike Sam was ready to engage and enjoy herself. It was no surprise when she spoke in her natural voice confirming this.

“Glasgow must get back to where it belongs, at the top of the charts - the number one city to visit in the UK.”

As Jason shook her hand, he looked at Theo to gauge his reaction as to the claim he had just heard. Theo felt the interest from the chief executive and quickly added: “Cynthia has lots of followers on her

entertainment blog,” he voiced in a professional tone, before adding: “Yes, it is true every city needs to offer entertainment to its citizens. We need to get more people out in Glasgow socialising even though there is a cost of living crisis.”

Cynthia laughed at this, but she was quick to cover the indiscretion. “Yes, boss, braless Monday is proving a hit at the moment,” was the joke she made.

Everyone laughed. Cynthia, they could see, was ready to follow any upward curve no matter towards what trend, fashion, or commercial venture that was on the go at the moment.

In fact, anything that was of interest to the public was worth promoting as far as Cynthia was concerned. She would highlight this in her blog every day on the Clipe website. All sorts of weird and wonderful trends, going on at the moment, were promoted by the star of Clipe Media. Cynthia did not stand on ceremony, and this seemed to go down well with her contacts in all sectors of the entertainment industry.

“How do you get to all those gigs,” laughed Theo, “and get back to work the next day?”

Cynthia sighed and with a huge smile replied, “Love your job and it is easy.”

Due to her being a great sales person Cynthia had the knack of never being a stranger to anyone, and she spoke to the executive accordingly in an upbeat and friendly tone. It was as if she had met him before. After a few moments Len came forward from behind Cynthia and stood waiting to be introduced.

“This is Len; he is our political correspondent.

Len shook the hand of Jason the executive and both men seemed to be happy at that. Theo knew Len’s quiet persona hid a curious mind.

It was plain to see Len was of the old left wing brigade who had been seduced by the goodies that the right wing Thatcher government brought in north of the border, many years ago, when he started his working life. Many lefties his age were like him. They hated Thatcher still, even though they had bought their own council houses not to mention setup their own businesses, enjoyed tax credits, and grants involving all sorts of schemes. The left wing was no longer a threat to the government, or the state. They were seen now like old hippies ageing in a digital world.

Presently, Theo explained Len's role to the London executive: "Len does all the political stories and covers all the court cases."

"That's correct," replied Len looking over at his boss to confirm this.

Jason, who was still standing beside Theo, gave a nod, but said nothing other to the group than: "Right, let's all sit down and have a cup of something."

It was all very jolly. They had tea and biscuits and in the hour that followed they all got to know the new executive boss, and what he thought about the world of 2024. Moreover, what he wanted from Clipe Media north of the border.

Theo turned on the charm. He did not have a lot of it, but what he had he turned it on: "As editor, I know my aim is to increase the awareness of Clipe Media, not just in this country, but abroad. We have got a great product here and, I know from the short time I have been the editor, we have a good team of writers. The Clipe Internet website is much appreciated by the public, and we aim to expose all sorts of activities going on in this strange time we are living in."

However, before they all went back to work Jason, the executive, from down south, left them in no doubt about the direction of travel of Clipe Media, here in Glasgow.

“We need to intrude in people’s lives. The public are always hungry for gossip, and that is what we here at Clipe International Media will give them. I am sure you all agree, controversy always follows a good investigation...”

8. New Freesheet

The first edition of the Messenger freesheet, under the new editor Theo Rosenberg, went out the following Monday. There were no hitches, apart from Theo forgetting to insert his full CV, as to where he had worked previously.

The new editor of Clipe Media and the Messenger freesheet is Theo Rosenberg. Theo has a passion for Scottish history, and will be inviting readers to add their thoughts as to how to make the UK great again. We will let Theo explain: 'I am sure you agree that our country should be run as a democracy on behalf of the people by our elected representatives. This should be the priority of all media companies: to hold the government of the day to account. Over the last decade, I have worked in London in many media companies and will make sure a fresh perspective is given to our readers here in Scotland.'

In the following editions there was no mention of the other companies Theo Rosenberg had been involved with: major banks, large breweries, Private Trusts and Pension funds.

Knowing the game, Theo did not make any great alterations, or demands, to the staff to change anything on the Clipe Internet website, or for that matter anything in the new Messenger freesheet, that his team had proposed.

In his 45 year career in business, Theo had learned to rock the boat slowly. The new editor of Clipe Media, and the Messenger freesheet, as he had in other companies, planned to bring in the changes where and when the time was right.

Theo knew that the stories Clipe were reporting on were in the main what all the other media sites were covering at this time: cost of living crisis, the influx of migrants, the war in Ukraine, not to mention national celebrities being put down and shown up.

However, there was one story in the new edition of the freesheet, the Messenger, that went out that week to the sharp eye indicated a definite change in direction.

One such person who noticed the change was the fellow the editor called the street spook. Freddie was onto it right away. He phoned Theo that afternoon: "I see the Messenger is getting political," he said in a good hearted tone.

"You think so?" replied Theo, sitting alone in the Lomond suite.

"Yes, very much so. The exclusive about Scotland becoming the spy capital of Europe has certainly caught my imagination. Just look at the comments on the same page as the article. Where did that story come from, Theo?"

Knowing Freddie was in the Circus, Theo thought for a moment before answering him: "I got a call from someone who is working in, let's say an unusual job."

"Observing traffic on the Internet?" Freddie wondered.

"Well, you could say that. He was unhappy with what the spooks were up to."

"Did the blogger leave his name with you?"

"No, and I didn't ask for one."

There was a silence between them, before Freddie probed once more: "Interesting, I am sure there will be a follow up to this story."

"I hope so, Freddie."

"It is interesting."

"I thought you would like that one," quipped the editor teasing him. "It was a lucky break, I met a man in a pub, so to speak. Of course, as I said, I have left the channel open. I am sure he will get back to me when the time is right - will keep you posted."

Theo was not sure who Freddie was working for. These days there were that many cliques about, no one knew who was working for who. The only thing you could tell was that whatever you said, either spoken or written, was captured and forwarded on to some agency by someone working for somebody. Money was exchanged for data and many citizens lives were ruined, or brought to a sudden end, by those who worked in the shadows.

However, it was near impossible to find out if the agent was working for the British government, or some foreign adversary like the Russians or Chinese.

Freddie's young mind had been stimulated: "In the piece it was mentioned the informant said that they

now have agents in every area in Scotland monitoring its citizens. Do you think that is true?"

Theo could not care less about that. He knew Freddie was only interested in what people were watching on their computers, or what they were saying on their phones. Theo Rosenberg on the other hand was only interested in making money, and getting out of the rat race. Target date, this time next year.

Theo knew how to play the game: "Yes, that is what my source told me Freddie."

"Is he reliable?"

"Well, we will have to wait and see about that," said the editor then, after a theatrical pause, he added: "Can't reveal my sources Freddie, but more to come on that one, I am sure."

They then went on to chat about the never ending topic of football. This of course was the main interest for those who lived in the city of Glasgow, and most definitely for those who ran media internet sites, like Clipe, Media. The fans followed their teams not only on a Saturday, but with every passing minute of the day through the week. All media outlets had to, in one way or another, incorporate the national game into their news sites.

Theo could not help but wonder about Freddie. When he first met him in the library: how he knew his name before being told it by him. The two young fellows he was with, and how he had casually bumped into them again outside the library

"Why were they waiting outside? What were they after?" he often wondered.

And when he came out with Freddie how the two lads from Oregon had greeted him like Jack the lad. And when they were all chatting away quite the thing

how a girl his age came out of the crowd and took Freddie away leaving Theo with the two foreign lads.

Theo knew the street agents, to give them a neutral title, always worked in a group. On reflection he thought the two lads from Oregon both looked as if they had been in the military or police. To the trained eye expoliceman and former soldiers could not hide that from those who had had a run in with the law.

Theo was lucky to escape his last encounter: the mobile phone episode. He often thought about it. While driving a camera caught him at the wheel. Fortunately, for him the picture was not clear and his defence put forward that it could have been a bar of chocolate in his hand.

Like every good journalist Theo was good at keeping an eye out on what was happening around him, as well as what was going on in the country, without really getting involved.

Thinking ahead he thought he had better keep Freddie the street agent engaged. Theo after glancing at the stocks and shares app, as he fidgeted with his iPad, asked him: "Freddie, what is happening with the Freedom movement. When is the next march?"

"This Saturday, I believe," said the young lad surprised at the question: "They usually meet up at the Donald Dewar statue at the top of Buchanan Street. However, this time I hear they are going to start the march off from Glasgow Green."

"Are you going?"

"Yes, I will be in the demo," said Freddie who laughed like a mischievous schoolgirl: "How I love all the noise and the banter of a street parade."

"I am sure it is good fun, Freddie."

When he had settled down, Freddie asked the editor: "Will you be there?"

Theo thought about this for a moment, then replied: "I will try to get into town round about midday and catch them coming into the city."

"Keep an eye out for me in the parade, as we head up Buchanan Street," lisped Freddie.

"I am sure I won't miss you," replied the editor, turning off his iPad.

"By the way Theo, Topaz likes the way things are going; he told me to pass his compliments on to you. He has more stories for you for the Clipe media site, and one for the new Messenger freesheet."

"Are you free for a coffee this week?"

"Yes, I can manage that Freddie.

"Thursday ok."

"Ok, with me, Freddie."

"Where should we meet?"

"Suggest: Meg's the bakers in the Buchanan centre, not far from that statue you just mentioned."

"No expense spared," Freddie mocked him. "What time?"

"Say 2pm."

"Okay, see you there."

9. Friend or Foe

Meg's the bakers had a large outlet on the ground floor in what had become known as the Galleries. This complex was home to some of the best retail names in the business. Well, the ones that had survived after the pandemic.

It was well known that Pre covid this area was part of the Style Mile. The city was always boasting that people came from all over the country just to shop here. Which was true then, but not so much now.

The bakery was the first outlet inside the gallery on the entrance street side. It was a budget, cheap and cheerful, place to visit. Essentially, it was for those who wanted to avoid paying more than £2 for a cup of hot water with a tea bag in it, and a light snack for under a fiver. This combination was very popular with office workers, shoppers, as well as students, day trippers and tourists. The light meal could certainly get you through the day.

Theo was familiar with what they offered. He liked going in from time to time. The affection for fast food with him went back to his teenage years. He always remembered that when he first went to secondary school, the crowd he hung about with all went to the outlet across the road from the school.

Megs was similar to the sole trader way back then. It was not the same trade name though, but the same idea, and it sold the same kind of things: sausage rolls, pies, cakes, soups, and crisps.

However, he had never seen any hot Apple turnovers in any baker's shop, for that matter, since he had left school. He recently had read on one Internet site someone saying: Why no Apple turnovers anymore? Although, he did not add a comment to the post, this resonated with him.

His favourite memory was standing outside the school eating an apple turnover with his mates, before going for a smoke down the lane, next to the fire station. Theo hoped someone would start selling Apple turnovers again. No wonder there was an outcry about this on social media: Why no Apple turnovers?

As Theo stood in the little queue and waited for Freddie, the street actor as he called him, the editor took in the folk around him. The outlet was busy. It was plain to see why Meg's was still a popular place to visit in 2024: low prices with a reasonable selection of food on offer.

When out and about, Theo liked to study people and places; the buying public always interested him. The majority he could see in here today were middle aged men and women, representing as he saw them as the shabby sheep of Glasgow.

The aforementioned, along with students and others, naturally liked to cost cut. Indeed this made up the wonderful everyday tapestry of the city - did it not? Not only that looking at them made him feel good; for he felt that he had a duty to study them. After all, many of them every day were reading the Clipe international media website, and he was the editor.

When he got to the counter he smiled at the young lady. She looked as if she had just left school the day before yesterday.

“Sausage roll please, and a cup of tea,” he said, in his usual droll way

“You are hungry?” came the voice from behind him.”

“Freddie your timing is impeccable. What do you want?”

The editor of Clipe of course knew the city well, and for something to say he said as much to the street actor: “This place is amazing isn’t for a company that started off as a door to door bakery delivering eggs and such like. Now they have a chain in every city in the UK. Not bad going, eh.”

Knowing that everything was on expenses Freddie smiled, as he looked up at the colourful advertisement above the counter.

The young spook pondered for a moment or two, before giving a thoughtful reply: “I am going to go for an Americano and a Chelsea bun.”

Theo had been too long in the media to know how people who worked for the surveillance agencies acted with others. To him, Freddie was a ponce. However, the editor was pragmatic; he knew everyone had to make a living somehow.

“This is one of my favourite places in Glasgow,” grinned Freddie.

What if Glasgow was now the spy capital of Europe due to its lax laws, open borders and free thinking attitude towards foreigners, sexual neutrality, and of course the ongoing independence question. What was that to Theo Rosenberg?

The editor knew that all the issues that had flowed from government departments and media outlets brought people together. This fascinated him, but the issues of the day - no. Indeed what brought young and old together into sharing the spirit of the time for him was nothing other than the ways of the world.

Why many young and old had been recruited by the agencies to spy on others was still not clear to him. He knew that some spooks never even left their homes to do this kind of work. Spying on your neighbours was after all as old as the hills. Hackers were both young and old that was true, now as it was then.

One thing though was obvious to the new editor of Clipse Media: those who had joined the services - yes many were young and professional looking - were all off the wall. He knew some spooks plied their trade from cheap Internet cafes, or they went to bars and restaurants and picked up the Wi-Fi signal there.

Playing the game, Theo slowly turned his head towards Freddie and said to him: “You have been hiding in the centre waiting for me for the last hour - haven't you Freddie?”

At first, Freddie looked coy at this remark, then he smiled like a boy who had been found with something on him he should not have had.

To distract the editor, young Freddie looked up at the menu above him. Thereafter, he showed no emotion

which was unusual for him to do that. Looking down again at the young schoolgirl waiting to serve him, he jumped back into character: "I like it in here; it's cool. "Yes, Americano coffee and a Chelsea bun, please," he confirmed to the assistant.

Presently, with drinks and food in hand, they both walked over to the seated area, and seeing some seats available over on the left hand side, they made their way over to them.

The table by the large window that looked back out onto the concourse had just been vacated. It was strewn with cartons, plastic bottles, crushed pokes, that had once carried sausage rolls, and other hot foods stuff.

For some reason the messy table seemed to bother the young spook. He stared at it indignantly, before sitting down. Freddie was keen to distract the editor from the mess. He made an observation, as he looked out onto the concourse at the people walking past, and going up and down the escalators. Like an old maid, he said to the editor: "I will get someone to clean this up," and away he went.

Theo had been here many times before and thought it was what it was. After all it was a budget outlet. Theo did not reply. He just looked over to his right through the window again and watched all the shoppers going up and down the escalators.

Presently, a young Indian girl came over with Freddie and cleaned the table. As soon as she was gone, Freddie sat down and got straight to business: "Topaz wants you to meet a man named Edmund Piltcher. He is involved funding the arts here in Glasgow. The details are in this envelope."

And with that Freddie without any expression on his young Anglo-Bengali face pushed a small brown

envelope under the table onto the lap of the editor of the Clipse Internet website.

Before he picked up his plastic cup of tea from the now clean table, Theo took the envelope in his hand and put it straight into his suit pocket. After it was securely in his possession, he coldly asked: "What type of arts is he in?"

"Mainly the high end stuff like ballet and art galleries."

"I see. Are you going to setup a meeting with me and him?"

"Yes, I have already done so, but before that you have to meet another courier this Friday in town at five o'clock. He will be sitting outside on the bench in George Square. He will have with him a copy of the National newspaper, and will be wearing a duffle coat, gray flannels, and a wooly hat."

"Friend or foe?" asked Theo, as he took the hot tea bag out of the carton cup.

With no reply to this, he placed it on top of the plastic cap, now lying nearby, paused and waited for the answer. When nothing came, he sighed as if exasperated: "Right, what is this all about Freddie?" he asked in a direct tone.

"Next month, there is to be a defection from the touring company on the first night of the performance of the Nutcracker suite. It will take place at the main auditorium. A Russian woman, a friend of ours is involved with the touring company. She is being called back home after doing good work abroad. On the opening night of the performance, she will return."

"Just like that, eh," interjected Theo, as he brought the hot carton of tea to his mouth.

“This will not upset the Nutcracker production company in anyway; for she has an accomplished understudy who will take her place. There will be no fuss.”

“Is she a spy.”

“Oh, Theo dear, everyone is a spy in Russia.”

“And what am I to do with her?”

“You will take her to your office in Bath Street. There the courier will debrief the agent before being taken away to the west end where she will stay. You will have the sole rights to the scoop, thereafter.”

“And when and where do I get to meet the lady

“She is a singer who goes by the name of Irina .”

Mr Pilcher will inform you how to do it. He has the masterplan from Topaz. He will set up the meeting with you and the contact at the theatre. When you meet him, he will update you on her story and how the defection should progress.”

“And do I print all that I hear?”

“No, you will run it by Topaz first.”

“Via you.”

“Yes.”

“Given the timescale it should be ready for a Clipse edition sometime next week, a few days after the defection.

“Are there others in on this?”

“Yes, there are. Many agents are following our friend. It is all hush hush at the moment. Mum’s the word.”

“Yes, I can imagine.”

“Agent Irina is being well protected by our friends within the World Opera Company.

“It will cost you.”

“Of course it will. How much should I tell Mr Topaz?”

“Well given the severity of the situation and risk, I would say 10 grand.”

“I will tell my boss.”

Theo relaxed after seeing another payment coming his way; this always had a great effect on him. Money coming in to his account seemed to reassure him that he was important, and not only that the dream of living abroad came to life in him again. He could almost feel the heat from the beaches of the Near East, never mind the Far East, when he heard amounts like 10k being earmarked for his account.

Freddie relaxed after his brief, and he moved away from the forthcoming adventure, and started talking about mundane matters in life. In an insouciant tone, he asked: “Any nice trips this year planned, Theo?”

“No, not at the moment, Freddie but I am hopeful I will get a break soon,” answered the coy editor.

“Oh, I love to travel,” said Freddie keeping the conversation light.

“Where do you like to go? asked Theo.

“With all the troubles ongoing in Europe at the moment, I am looking past the usual places.”

“Where to?”

“The far east.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Oh, can’t see past Vietnam at the moment,” said the young spook smiling at the editor.

Theo of course was interested in this part of the world too, but he never let on. “Are you old enough to remember the Viet Cong?”

After saying this strange combination of words, and knowing they had entered his mind, Theo could see that

the name meant nothing to the young man opposite him.

Staring into the editor's eyes Freddie shook his head, "Good name for a far east boy band though," and giggled.

Theo thought he would test him further: "Or are you going looking for tunnels?"

"Tunnels. No," laughed the street spook, I like the beaches and the boy bars."

Theo thought as much, though he had never questioned his sexual preference with him. The new editor of the Clipe Internet site being up on the ways of the computer world never spoke to anyone these days about another's sexuality, male or female. It was the same online, as it was in real time.

This after all was a time where what went on went on - and was only questioned if it was not part of a media initiative. Unless someone was obstreperous anything and everything was allowed to go on by the state, so for professional people it was not the done thing to question anything to do with sex. As a rule of thumb, Theo did not pursue this topic, or any other gender question either. Most people thought that if you questioned something like sex, you could end up on the wrong side of the law and in court.

Moments later together they walked out of the complex: "Be in touch," were Freddie's parting words to the editor.

Theo couldn't help but smile at the way the young spook acted. The boy was not a man yet, but he acted like one.

As the editor walked away in the opposite direction of Buchanan Street, Theo let him know again: "Don't forget to mention me to Mr Topaz."

“No, I won’t, Mr Rosenberg.”

Half way down Buchanan Street the editor’s mobile phone rang, Theo could see there was a prerecorded message on it. The number he did not know. Naturally, he pressed the button wondering what the message was going to say. There was a crackle, then a synthetic voice relayed the following:

A ticket will arrive today for you at Clipe Media office in Bath Street, Glasgow, for the opera the Nutcracker suite.

Feeling like he was living inside a James Bond movie, Theo crossed the road to the bar over at the far end of Gordon Street. When he was involved in a strange business scheme, or in subterfuge, Theo like to slip into a bar somewhere - preferably one he had never been in before - and relax. It was natural for him now was it not to feel like an industrial spy. Certainly that is what he was.

The sign above the door he noticed had an image of a peasant woman. He did not know the establishment Stalingrad, but nevertheless he went down the stairs to investigate it. “Yes, Stalingrad sounds just what I am looking for, a reasonable name is it not for a pub in a time of war.”

Needless to say, the editor wanted to sit down and think about what was in front of him, and work everything out before committing himself to the next stage in the process. Theo Rosenberg was a great planner; he factored in everything what may or may not happen. Downstairs at the bar he bought himself a gin and tonic, and over to the far corner of the bar he went and there he sat and ruminated.

10. Off to the Ballet

Later that day when Theo arrived back in the office, after receiving his ticket, he checked the theatre website online. The seat he was given for the opera was number 77. He could see that his seat was not too far from the front. That pleased him, and he sipped his cold water that he had poured for himself from the water container always available in the corridor.

Cynthia who had got to know him quite well by this time sensed he was up to something and, as they sat together in the Lomond suite, she giggled before engaging him. She was always chatty even when he was not in a good mood:

“What’s happening, boss?”

He looked up surprised as if she knew what he was doing: “Going to the opera tonight, Cynthia.”

When she heard Theo say this her music antenna went to the max: “That sounds fab.”

“Well, it sounds something different, I grant you that.”

Cynthia had been standing over by the coat hanger, on her way out of the room. The magazine sent to her by Chat Global media company had been leafed and was done with, now in the bucket.

However, instead of going out of the room she sat down beside the editor, smiled at him and asked: "What time does it start?"

After all, entertainment was what Cynthia wrote about. There was nothing unusual about her asking that question. In and out of work the entertainment correspondent was always active. Hence the reason she was never seen to be down.

Although excited, in a matter of fact voice, Theo responded: "I have been invited to the Nutcracker ballet at the main opera house tonight," and as he looked up from staring at his ticket, not long arrived by courier, he asked her: "Have you been there, Cynthia?"

"Oh, it was a while ago. I went to see some tribute band at the main theatre, many years ago."

Sam who came into the lounge just at that moment felt the excitement in the air, and she too offered a comment: "Opera, that sounds nice."

Everyone knew the afternoon meeting would soon be underway. Len would no doubt be arriving late for the editor's meeting. All the team knew that it was 2pm for the gathering inside the Lomond suite.

Theo asked himself in a mocking tone: "What do Opera people do after they leave the theatre?"

When no one seemed to know. Theo put down the ticket, that he had been delivered to him by special agent, onto the boardroom table, and he stared at it again. "So where do opera fans hang out?" he quipped.

He was being clever of course, and his two colleagues knew it. Sam smiled at Cynthia and in her

usual laconic way remarked: "Well, there is pre theatre."

After switching off an incoming call on her mobile device, Cynthia in her usual bright and breezy way informed her colleagues, "You know before the pandemic, Opera was booming. However, like all the other arts they are still trying to get back to where they were before the virus wiped everything out."

Theo looked hard at the ticket again as if there was something hidden inside it. Fundamentally, this was an era when tiny digital computers could be put anywhere to compromise the citizen.

As if coming out of a dream, he said in an upbeat tone, "It is an invite from an old friend - should be fun, eh."

Just then Len appeared. The two men were so different. Theo could not care less what any political party said, wrote, or promoted. Len on the other hand wanted to expose the politicians, who he maintained were not only shutting down free speech, but encroaching on human rights, as well as wiping away traditional values throughout the land.

"They should start representing the people," he was always saying in the office.

Theo planned to stay in town that night. Even though he had worked down south since the late nineties; he knew the city well. After all, this was where he was born. He had worked hard after leaving school, got a job in Dublin and after that moved to London to a multi national tech company. Glasgow he always liked, though.

The editor's meeting broke up a bit later that day at 3.30 pm. An hour later Theo walked across the road to the Art Club. Ever since working with Clipe, he had

become fascinated by the old institution. He fancied having a drink and something to eat there before going to the opera house later that evening. To him this seemed the right thing to do.

The invitation of course was passed onto Cynthia, undercover of a work proposal: "Cindy, I want to get some ideas for the new Messenger freesheet," was his excuse.

Cynthia was up for that, especially when she mentioned they were going to have a meal. The only problem was she had to catch up on emails and would not make it over until about the quarter hour. The real excuse was Theo wanted to get her to sit with him by the window, as he talked to her about his vision for the Messenger freesheet.

As promised, Cynthia arrived at the Art Club not long after five, and after they had a few scoops at the bar, they made their way to the restaurant where a waiter ushered them to a table in a secluded spot at the far end of the room.

Theo, however, had other ideas: "Thank you, but can we get that table over there by the window, please."

"Certainly sir."

"I want to look out and watch the people going downtown," he whispered in an undertone to Cynthia. "The evening is always the best time to gauge what's going on in the city."

Many times on his way to and from the Clipse office, Theo had seen famous people sitting here at this very window doing just that. He knew Cynthia would like it too.

And she did: "Yes," she said, as she moved through the quiet restaurant with him. "Why not be seen in the Art Club, it will do us no harm, boss," she joked.

Indeed Theo liked the idea of someone he knew going by on the street seeing him devouring a leg of lamb, or drinking white wine from a large modern glass, with an interesting looking woman looking at him.

“That’s the new editor of Clipe,” he imagined one would say to another.

Cynthia being a great communicator was fabulous company; he knew she would be. The meal was not too bad either. The entertainment correspondent was fast becoming his deputy. Like him she had no real interest in the way the country was going. ‘Downhill fast,’ was the common expression of the time.

Cynthia wanted to ignite the arts and develop it into all sorts of new industries to escape the mundane world of 2024. He did not disagree with that. The editor believed Cynthia single-handedly could do this. He had never seen anyone so passionate before about their work.

Cynthia was old fashioned in many ways; she was married and gave nothing away about that to him. To Theo that meant she was happy, even though she liked to act as if she was a free spirit. The notion that he could lure her away with him to Vietnam had played in his mind, but had faded long before they sat down in the Art Club for their meal tonight. To him, she was content where she was and what she was doing.

After the meal they had a good old chat about the office, and the way things were going with Clipe Media. Both of them laughed at how ridiculous it all was. And of course the new freesheet the Messenger had still to be developed fully.

They said goodbye just after 7pm, and Theo jumped in a cab feeling quite Chipper. Bidding her adieu on the street outside the window where they had not long ago

sat, he laughed as he sang to her: "Right, off to see the Nutcracker ballet."

As soon as he got in the cab, the driver was duly told the same. However, the overweight cabbie could not understand him: "Where are you going, mate?"

Theo could see he did not hear him, or his farewell gesture to his fellow worker. The editor sat in back of the black hack and relaxed. When the taxi did not move, he sighed and said politely: "The main theatre in the town, please."

The tone he used although courteous did not sober up the editor and as they moved off, he dreamed out of the window as he watched the new boutique office of Clipe Media disappear into the distance.

The driver confirmed in his usual manner the destination: "Ah, the main concert hall in town. Very good, sir."

After the cabbie had digested his instructions it was he who became the comedian: "Nutcracker is a go go."

"You know about the concert?" asked Theo.

Now that he was sitting comfortably in the back seat of his cab, the driver could tell his passenger had had a few scoops at the Art Club. Not only that, but he knew who his passenger was. It was none other than the new Editor of Clipe Media: Theo Rosenberg.

"Did you know there was someone on the radio just the other night talking about the Nutcracker suite?"

"Oh, really," responded the editor.

"Yes, it was on the Scottish arts show, I am sure it was."

"No, I never heard it."

"Whoever the dude was he said that the first production went back to 1892, or something like that."

“It is amazing they are still showing it since the war in still raging on in the east,” responded Theo, keeping him engaged.

As the cab pulled up at the lights, outside the Royal School of Music, where all the students went in the afternoon to study music and drama, the cabbie turned round to get a better look at his passenger.

Theo felt his intrusive gaze: “Well, I guess they have not banned everything from Russia,” qualified the editor in the back seat.

“It is a wonder sir, with all the killing still going on.”

“As far as I know, it is an international production,” countered Theo, diplomatically.

Theo was certainly in a good mood now, and he knew he should be after three good glasses of wine at the Art Club.

“Traffic is busy,” commented the editor, as the cab left the lights.

As Theo looked down Union Street, before going through the next set of lights back came the reply: “Yes, things are getting back to near normal,” said the overweight cabbie as if he was the official guide for the city of Glasgow. “Friday will soon be like Friday again, as they say.”

“Let’s hope so,” muttered Theo.

As if he was now a chat show host, the cabbie laughed: “You should know sir, being the new editor of Clipe International website.”

Moments later, Theo paid the man by card. After he did this, he went into his trouser pocket and gave him a good tip with what loose change he had on him. The editor of Clipe Media knew that a tightfisted executive

in the city was quickly identified, not just by taxi drivers, but by the general public as well.

11. Nutcracker

Theo Rosenberg was no philistine; he had been to the opera before, albeit a long time ago. He never thought anymore of who he was with that night, more the experience of Don Giovanni had stayed with him, and the scream of the man who fell to hell.

The editor of Clipe Media knew that suspense was important prior to any drama, even before the lifting of the curtain, anticipation would edge the viewer towards the stage.

Like any dilettante, he knew a story to unfold was worth waiting to behold. He had learnt this from an aesthete friend at college. So as he sat there full of wine and full of hope, Theo once again felt like a child wanting to be entertained. Next to him sat a fat white haired woman, and a man who looked not unlike a famous comedian, he could not quite remember the name of. As if to convince himself it was not him, he had to look at the man twice just to reassure himself it was not who he first thought it was.

It would have been remiss of the editor of Clipe Media if he had not read up on the production notes. Theo always did this wherever he went be it to the theatre, football match, or political rally. This was just incase any questions came his way when he got back to the office.

‘What was it like?’

‘Did you like the music?’

‘Would you recommend it to our subscribers?’

The editor indeed had read E. T. A. Hoffmann's 1816 short story before going along. He knew that the Nutcracker suite was set on Christmas eve. He could see they certainly had a lovely big tree as the main prop right in the middle of the stage. This was the first thing that hit the audience when the curtain went up. From his notes, Theo knew that the Nutcracker came to life after everyone when to bed. The editor of Clipe, like everyone else, sat back in his comfortable chair, near the front of the theatre, and waited to be entertained.

As if from the past, or from the future, two figures danced onto the stage and tended the tree; others then followed. More dancers came forth from both sides of the stage. Soon the stage was full, and it was then that the 1892 ballet really came to life in spectacular form.

The first act he felt was a real treat, like a dream where nothing much happens other than you become part of it by just drifting along with the music, and the figures pirouetting here and there. The general feeling was that everyone would end up somewhere pleasant if you stuck with the melody and the figures highlighted by the colourful lights everywhere on stage. The change of mood and the general expectation of having sound and vision coming and going, as your guide, interrupted the viewer at times. Even though the fantasy

sometimes faded, something kept Theo Rosenberg interested.

As the first interval drew to a close, the music faded away. Theo moved in his seat indicating he was ready to stand up. When the time came, he thought he had better say something to the fat white haired woman next to him: "I think it is time for a G and T," he announced and smiled at her.

The fat white haired woman next to him made a face as if someone had pinged her bra strap bringing her back to the sentient world.

"Oh!" was all she said though.

As the dim lights came on, others too had the same idea and made their way along the isle of the theatre towards where the bar and the toilets were situated. The woman could see the man next to her was not alone in going to the bar. She smiled at Theo, as he got up out of his seat, before heading up the isle.

The theatre had been popular before Covid with theatregoers, but it was noticeable many folks just stood about in the corridor now and chatted. They no longer went to the bar. It was hard to find exuberance in any crowd these days, no matter where you went. Of course, this was due to the cost of living crisis that followed covid, and the war in the east. Many people for the first time were having to tightened their belts, or in some cases sit in the cold and in the dark. It was said that this was even going on in luxury homes where the owners drove fancy cars, sailed yachts and boats. Those at the theatre tonight could see that face masks were still worn by quite a few theatregoers just in case the virus was lurking about.

"Nonsense!" said someone about some issue.

This sentiment seemed to fit in with Theo's thoughts as he passed by them and approached the bar. He looked at the group of four ladies, and could see that this was where the lively voices were coming from. It was plain to see they were having no restrictions on their night out. Their party night out was not going to be curtailed by past or present woes. The ladies already had their drinks in hand - all large glasses of wine. They were grouped together where the isle met the corridor, and under the dim lights of the theatre it was plain to see they had no obvious airs and graces about them.

Theo noticed one dominant character in amongst them. She talked endlessly about others in the office, who were obviously not there in the party tonight.

The editor could see the round faced plump blonde knew everything about the company she worked for, and moreover had an opinion on all the contractors who came and went throughout the year into the office where she was employed.

Gillian was her name, that came out in the conversation. She was a witch, there was no doubt about that. The barman a good twenty yards away could see that too; he smiled over at Theo as his customer approached him.

Due to his smart suit and tie, naturally the barman took him to be someone important in the city, and he served him before others, who were standing at the bar. It was easy for him to do this; for the lovelies were fussing over some detail not mentioned in the programme.

Theo after buying a gin and tonic went back to where the ladies were standing, and once more he listened in to their party talk; it was a strange brew indeed. This was real theatre.

Gillian blazed: "Do you remember Graham Hendrie. You must remember him; he worked for us for a time in the accounts department. No one knew anything about him. He did not talk about himself, or his family. He definitely had strange ways. Don't you remember him. He was weird, careful with money, but not short of a few bob. We never knew where he went on his holidays, but he always came back brown as a berry, and when the girls asked where he had been, he always said: 'Oh, the sun has only to pop out from behind a cloud and I get a suntan.' No one knew where or who he stayed with, or if indeed he had any friends."

When Theo first left school, he had worked with women like this. They were actually all right in the office. However, he knew as soon as they left the building something changed. And when they got alcohol into their system - well there was no stopping them then. The wine they were drinking tonight certainly made their tongues waggle. In the corridor inside the theatre, they ruled the world all right. There was no doubt about that - well for a time anyway.

Everyone was fair game for a dressing down, defamed, ridiculed, and maligned - of course if they were not present in the company. It was true was it not: no one was safe from the office bitch.

After he had finished his second gin, the editor of Clipe Media looked around him again. He could see the bar was only half full now; mainly young people in town for a night out, and talking the way young people do. The endless possibilities of the young he recognised and liked. As a middle aged man, Theo smiled to himself and for a moment drifted back to when he was - like them - part of a crowd in town.

Presently, Theo walked over and stood near to the exit door, just by the alcove, and there he stood for a moment. He had not brought his mobile device with him, and for that reason he had nothing to look at. Normally, he would have read a news story or book online while killing time. Like all editors nowadays he knew it was not safe anymore to have a tracking device on him.

Theo was intrigued, even if he was bored: "I wonder who the contact is I have to meet here tonight?" and as he pondered he looked around for a curious face to study.

He had not long to wait. Up the dark isle came a dazzling tall woman dressed in a white coat, short dark hair tied back in a bun. Like an old colleague from his past, she approached him: "I believe you are the editor for the Clipe Internet media site."

"Yes, that is correct."

She smirked: "And here to cover the production of the Nutcracker?"

The English accent was pure, not cockney or Essex, but from one of the gentry schools. She had obviously been to a private school, there was no doubt about that.

Theo said nothing, but just smiled. While standing near a bar, he always felt relaxed. When he arrived, he spotted the alcove was empty on the left-hand side. He suggested to her: "Can we go over there and talk about it. What would you like to drink?"

"Perrier water, please," came the silky response.

As he readied his credit card for payment, Theo noticed the lady in the white coat slip into the alcove like a lady accustomed to meeting a stranger in the theatre. When they both sat together, the dazzling lady he could see had herself once been a performer on the

world stage, and he guessed she was probably now a PA for some director, no doubt one of the many companies who hoovered up data and acted upon it for some client or other.

As he got ready to go to the bar, Theo put his glass down on the little table that is until he spotted there was a soupcon on gin still in it. He quickly brought it to his mouth and finished it off. He then went over to the bar and ordered a Perrier water and another gin for himself.

When he sat down again, the editor watched his contact as she put the sparkling French water to her mouth. Presently, over the glass that held the carbonated mineral water, the courier whispered. "As the curtain goes up for the second act, the chorus girl will appear."

Her accent this time gave away a faint eastern lisp. Theo was taking it all in. He was in a good mood; for he imagined he would be doing this kind of thing for the rest of the year.

He sipped his G&T, then with a grin replied: "And then what?"

"We had better leave in case we are spotted," said the lady in the white coat," and gave a furtive glance towards the exit sign.

Theo wondered aloud: "Do you think we will be followed?"

He looked in the direction he thought they should go to egress the theatre. It was to the left of the bar down the stairs, then out the door.

"My office is on Bath Street, not far from here. However, we had better grab a cab when we get outside."

As the lights slowly dimmed, lovely music could be heard once again, and the lights from the stage came on. The curtain was still down, but Act 11 of the Nutcracker was underway. Not long after this a thin lady around thirty appeared. Petite, blonde, with a ghost like face. The young lady must have come up the isle the same way as the editor of Clipe Media.

Presently, the waif like figure came over to where they were sitting and stood in front of them by the bar at the alcove. Just like an extra in the play she waited for her instructions to go back on stage, or not as the case may be. There the waif stood and stared at the editor and courier.

Theo noticed the barman looked over, then away again, as if he was part of the plot. Theo had never used the night code at the Clipe office. He was given this on his first day there, but thankfully he remembered the number to gain entry: 1707. This was given to him by Bill the security man. Any problems he was told he could get a hold of him at home.

Fortunately a cab arrived as soon as they got outside the theatre. The natural light had gone by now, and the city street once more was a haven for pleasure seekers, under false lights and dark shadows.

Theo knew both worlds and so too he thought did his companion the courier. Presently, the three of them sat in the back seat of the hack, and in no time at all they were outside the office of Clipe Media on Bath Street, Glasgow.

12 Night Code

As he tapped in the code to gain entry to his office, Theo remembered he could access the bar there. With this in mind, he turned and looked at his two companions: “I am sure a nightcap will be much appreciated by everyone,” he said, as the click from the door confirmed entry.

On the day he met the chief executive from London, Jason Robertson had made a joke to him about this: “Well Theo, if you are ever thrown out the house you can get in here for the night. Grab yourself a drink at the bar, and then bed down on the satee over there.”

Even though the designer firm upstairs had nothing to do with Clipe Media, they shared the same facilities within the complex. However, it was obvious there was no one about tonight.

After the large glass door was pushed open, they all walked inside and like magic all the lights in the modern office came on.

His guests were quite impressed by this - who wouldn't be. It had not long been refurbished into what was now described as a boutique hotel. Certainly everything looked brand new: lovely murals, modern paintings, some even transformed by colour to make them pop icons. There were many small sofas dotted about here and there. They even had a fountain and a small bar that served snacks. For whatever reason no one seemed to go to the bar during the day.

Theo knowing the gimmicks of the corporate world walked inside and pushed another door open. He indicated to the young spy and the courier, for them to go into the Lomond suite.

"Please go in. I will get you something to drink," he said in a sober business tone, "We have a little bar here in the office. I believe someone has named it the Last Resort," and with that he smiled at the young ballerina.

"That's nice," said the courier who after taking off her white coat turned to the host and said: "I will have a glass of wine, please. What about you Irina?"

"Yes, white wine, please," requested the spy in a thick untrained Russian-English accent.

The courier must have spotted the toilet across the way from the Lomond suite: "Excuse me," for over she went and disappeared inside it.

Alone with the ballerina, after he came back from the bar, Theo put a bottle of wine on the table and to break the ice chatted away: "There is another company here who shares the office with us. They apparently offer workspace for micro and small businesses, storage or something like that. Though, I have never met any of them. They are never in here at this time of night anyway."

Irina the spy stared at him as if he had abducted her. She said nothing.

“Please sit down; I will go and get some glasses, and something to nibble at.”

Within minutes Theo was back with a tray of sweet meats, crisps and nuts, and three wine glasses.

With the courier in the toilet, Theo noticed she had taken off her white coat; for when she came back in to the Lomond suite she was now wearing a tight body seamless outfit, that he knew in the old days used to be called a bodystocking. Her long colourful silk scarf hung loose designed to protect her modesty. She was still young he could see that from her voluptuous body. He noticed too how easily she stretched to pick up her coat off the boardroom table and hang it up on the stand by the door. After doing this she came forward, and for the first time in a friendly relaxed tone said to him: “Oh, I am ready for my drink now after all the excitement.”

The courier took a glass off the tray and waited for it to be filled by the host, and when this was done she smiled at him. The late night soirée seemed to be to her liking: “Ah, Chardony, a nice wine for this time of night, Mr Rosenberg,” she said after noticing the name on the bottle on the board room table.

Theo did not sit in his usual chair at the top of the boardroom table, but joined the two ladies at the far end near the door.

As they all sat together, the courier got right to the point: “Theo, as you know what we want is for Irina to work here as a reporter on politics. Of course, this will only be possible after everything has died down. The proposal from Topaz is that Irina will change her name. Under the title of foreign correspondent no one will know who she is, or where she is from. Irina is going to

live with me for a time in my flat in the Kelvingrove area in the west end of the city. I will take care of her outside of office hours.”

Theo was good with bossy women and the courier sensed this. She looked at him, but she could see he did not react the way weak men do by nodding, and asking more and more questions.

The outward impression he got was that this had been sanctioned by the UK spooks. Little did the courier know that Theo could not care less who was behind it - all he wanted was his cut.

“Topaz will send you what you requested,” she confirmed moments later.

It was nice to hear the courier say that. Something jingled within Theo Rosenberg at the sound of money going into his foreign bank account. It was always the same with Theo. This was the only time he really engaged with others. Whoever it was he was involved with, Theo could see that they would pay up. He followed the scent of money like a man looking for lost treasure. Although most people did this, Theo was an expert at reading it in others. Only people who were not interested in making lots of money worried him. He knew most folks were like this: out to get what they could. Theo was comfortable with them. They wanted the same kind of things as he did.

The courier did not trouble him at all. The woman from the Nutcracker Ballet was too young; a dreamer in the arts would not bother him either. He would set her up all right from her home as a media pundit. Theo trusted his senses and invariably they did not let him down.

“I have hardly eaten anything today,” sighed the young ballerina, in a funny choked english accent. With

that she stretched forward from her chair in a manner like a beautiful gazelle and took up some crisps from the plate, then lifted her glass of wine.

“This is our usual place we meet,” said Theo smiling at her.

“I believe you have been behind the wall,” said the courier looking at him across the board room table.

“Yes, that’s right. Many years ago, I went to Berlin with a friend. We travelled underground that day and went behind the wall.”

“This is where you met, Mr Topaz?”

“It certainly was.”

“You were lucky.”

“Yes, of course with Topaz getting in touch with me about you, I was certainly lucky.”

The ballerina as she listened to the conversation sat back in her comfortable chair, and gave a rye smile to herself. Theo could see the ballerina, like the courier, off stage was alluring in casual gear. Irina took another sip of wine the way any opera star would, and with a delicate manner she sat there with great poise staring at him.

“Topaz is famous in the east. Everyone loves him. “Don’t they, Irina.”

Irina confirmed this by way of a smile leaving no doubt that Topaz was well known to everyone in their circle.

“I wonder where Topaz is tonight; they say he never stays in the one place for any length of time,” wondered aloud the courier. Then to add to the mystery, she suggested: “I wonder if he was at the Nutcracker opera tonight? He is a master of disguise.”

The ballerina was an artist; Theo could see that in her. Someone to look at, but not to touch. She would no

doubt make a good foreign correspondent. Her perfect proportioned face was ready made for television and Internet news sites. Theo could see her reading, or talking, about some news event, or giving a resume about some famous artist. Yes, she certainly was the kind of young woman you saw every night on tv sitting in a flat somewhere talking live about some important topic: "Of course the Russian leader is unpopular at the moment, but that will not trouble him. He is not someone who bothers about his ratings in the west..."

Theo could indeed imagine her saying something like that on the Clipe international website. This is where she would spread propaganda, or as it has been renamed in the west: Fake News.

This did not trouble Theo in the slightest, only money troubled him. He would go along with their schemes. After all, this is what he said to Freddie the spook, and he meant it: "As long as the money gets paid into my bank, I could not care what your agents write in the Clipe Media site, or the Messenger freesheet."

He knew the next time he met Freddie, the money would be transferred into his foreign bank account and that made the editor of Clipe Media feel good. Theo's plan was in place.

13 The Jewellery Arcade

Theo entered the bar from the arcade. He knew this was the only bar inside the Jewellery Quarter, and this was where he knew he had to meet the young street actor, as he called him, Freddie Fadalla.

Ever since he started work - way back in the late 70's - Theo Rosenberg had a thing about looking in Jewellery shop windows. This came about after he bought with his first wage his first watch in the Argyle Arcade in Glasgow. How he still loved that classical watch from Switzerland, with its roman numerals and lovely clear face, that he purchased all those years ago.

Inside the bar, he said as much to the young spook as he sat down beside him: "The jewellery arcade is quite a feast for those in search of watch or a ring, don't you think?" and as he made himself comfortable in the cushioned seat not far from the bar, he added: "I have always liked the arcade. This is one of Europes first covered arcades, you know, built in the Parisian style."

Freddie being in the surveillance game showed an interest and aptitude in everything around him; for everything he knew was relative, was it not, in the spying game. Like others before him, who had signed up for surveillance work, he knew that the power of observation, and knowledge, was the key to being a successful spy.

It was true the interest in diamonds and pearls, even in the digital age, still captivated people, no matter their income. Freddie, as another customer came into the pub, asked the obvious question: "Why is there only one bar in the arcade?"

Theo was not sure: "Still today they come rich and poor, along with the hoi polloi, to buy their diamonds and pearls in here," is how he answered him.

Owen's bar, as it was called, had a traditional feel to it and, as they waited to be served, Freddie indeed wondered what it must have been like in here in olden times. He had of course read up on the topic too, and being a show off said as much. He quoted from the bar's website: "They opened in 1797, as a coffee house."

Theo thought about what he heard. He knew all of that and made some comments to keep the conversation going: "Yes, no background music in these days Freddie. Can you imagine it would have been full of smoke, people sitting around here laughing and joking. That was a time, dear boy, when swear words and laughter went together, and no one batted an eyelid. Yes, I am sure they would have all been in here at one time. The gentry, criminals and crooks, all mixed together. It certainly has been a well known bar in Glasgow, from what I can gather."

As if talking to one of his boyfriends, Freddie lisped: "By the way, Topaz thanks you for getting the ballerina

a job. You will be pleased to note that your money, as we speak, is making its way into your account.”

Theo had learnt not to smile or show any emotion when it came to money with others. This was a trick he had learnt many years ago.

When the editor did not respond, the young spook quickly changed the subject: “Did you know they have a Ceilidh night upstairs at the weekends in here?”

Theo looked towards the door where Freddie was staring at. Thinking of people coming to this place and doing a strathspey, reel, jig, or waltz, he smiled to himself. What the editor too had read in the menu on the window outside, he quoted to the young spook: “Yes, I believe Owens in the city centre is where couples used to come for a drink, before they went into buy their rings in one of the many jewellery shops in the arcade. Quite romantic, don’t you think?”

Theo knew Freddie was still young, and he played on that. The editor knew how to engage young and old. Someone as young as Freddy he knew would be interested in the traditions of the land when it came to love, fashion and romance.

A young waiter noticed them sitting there talking and over he came to see what they wanted to drink. As soon as he arrived, he asked in a bright breezy tone, as if he was promoting some kind of new religion: “Are you having lunch gentlemen?”

Their table was near to the door entrance leading back out onto the arcade. The young lad who was wishing to serve them bent forward again. When he heard no reply, he said in an even tone: “We have a special on today of Popcorn Chicken. Will you be having anything to eat?”

As they thought about this, Theo wondered where the restaurant was; for all he could see in front of him was a bar. “No thanks, just a coffee for me,” he answered looking directly at the waiter.

“Pot of tea for me,” ordered Freddie.

“Right, I will bring them over.”

“The restaurant must be upstairs,” thought Theo out loud.

“No, they just serve it here at the table,” answered Freddie in an assured tone.

Theo, who had been born on the Isle of Mull, was Scottish through and through. Even though he had travelled and had spent a good part of his youth down south, his memories living with his parents - both now gone - had not left him.

In the modern digital era, there was not much in the way of Scottish history left to engage with anyone anymore. Therefore, social history for the majority of Scots lay dormant within them. However, Theo still felt Scottish, but not in the present sense. He did not mind it that way. Britain had fundamentally changed - everyone knew that. There was not one village in the land that had not been untouched by social revolution. Every village had been europeanised and secularised by hidden corporations, media companies, government officials, rich financiers, and many other hidden forces.

The editor of Clipe Media reckoned the young waiter was like him. He too had once been Scottish, and like him was now looking for a way out of the modern world. Theo had no emotional attachment to his country anymore.

Showing off his power of oratory the editor said to the young spook in a serious tone: “Freddie, don’t you think people who come to this city to work lose their

past very quickly. It does not take long for them to see how cosmopolitan the world is around them. Their past, whatever it was, is soon obliterated by the current fashion of the time. No one talks Scottish anymore. No one talks about the Covenanters, John Knox, Rob Roy, Bruce, let alone David Hume, or Adam Smith. Once you have a job in the city you are introduced to a new way of living. Very few young people are interested in history in any case. Most folks just want to be hypnotised by the latest magician on the Internet, or whoever is the latest star on stage and screen. I guess most people are just trying to survive in the modern, post Covid, world, by living inside a digital illusion - and who can blame them, eh?"

The young spook was quite taken aback by this eloquence: "Not all young people are like that," he immediately responded, as if challenged.

Like everyone else, Theo knew that Freddie was a mixture of Indian and British, and that he could jump borders in his mind whenever he wanted to. However his reply surprised him.

Freddie must have recognised the young lad who had served them. Moments later, he whispered with one hand on the table and the other holding his neck: "I saw him, you know, on the last Freedom march that went through the town,"

There was a long pause. Theo again thought he should fill in the gap: "So, the waiter is a revolutionary."

"He is part of the club scene, drinks in the Crown bar and camps it up with the boys at the late night Glass Palace."

Even though he had a controller running him, Freddie was such a silly boy. This was his gift though,

and Theo knew it. He acted ten years older than he was, but still talked like a teenager.

As soon as he saw the waiter approach, Freddie took out his credit card and flashed it. Theo had noticed him act like this before. It was as if he was a well known singer or author visiting the city for the first time, eager to talk and engage, and be friendly.

“Thank you,” he said to the young lad and, as soon as he was gone, he turned to Theo and said in a tone that had no sympathy, empathy, or interest in another: “Topaz wants you to investigate this writer here. He has been causing problems with the local authority, and others in his local area,” and as he passed the brown envelope under the table, he stared over the editor’s shoulder. His training had obviously taught him how to look away when transferring documents; it was as if he was thinking about calling the young waiter back.

Like a movie actor in an espionage thriller, Freddie then handed Theo a small usb device over the table, covering it with his finger and thumb: “It’s all in here.”

After this was done, the young spook relaxed. Theo to keep the conversation going commented by saying: “This is not unlike the booth where I met Irina in, you know, at the theatre the other night.”

After putting the little usb in his pocket and out of sight, Theo added blandly: “The fee is a standard one. You will tell Topaz that, won’t you.”

“The next one is going to be a honey trap.”

“Really,” laughed Theo.

“Topaz has called it the Heath proposal. Although, I don’t really know what he means by that.”

Theo guessed right: “Well, there was a British prime minister called Edward Heath and in the seventies - if I remember correctly - he was set up by a secret agency

offering him a good looking young lad. Would that be it?"

"Oh," said Freddie interested in what he had just heard: "That sounds about right. Edward Heath, I will need to Google him when I get home."

"Yes, he was a bachelor and they thought they would try him out with a young man."

"Really," said Freddie, "You can't be up to those spooks."

"Heath was an interesting man; he conducted orchestras and went round the world in his yacht."

"Certainly this crowd come up with all sorts of schemes," mocked Freddie. "Anyway, as you will see it is all on the usb, they think from his computer history that he may be interested in a relationship with a younger man."

"I see."

"And who will that be?"

Freddie laughed out loud: "There are so many spooky blades out there these days it would make you wonder if there is anyone straight. However, I am afraid Theo, I get all the good jobs."

"You will do it?"

"That's what I get paid for, they tell me."

"You have done this before."

"Once you had read his file things will fall into place."

Trying not to laugh, Theo went on: "All right, I will put my best reporter on it," then in a matter of fact tone, added: "Len is very good at that kind of thing."

Just the other night, Theo read a story about a local writer from the south side of Glasgow, and wondered if it was the same chap who had just released a book

about the Second World War, after traveling through Europe.

“Is that the chap who has just written a book titled Piper Penman, a book about Scottish soldiers?”

“Yes, that’s the chap; he writes modern fiction too.”

“He is really interesting. He has written so many books, all different types. I am looking forward to meeting him again.”

“When is his next book due to be released?”

“I think it is next month.”

“Right, I will put a note in my diary. Yes, I will get Len onto it. We can do an interview for next month’s edition of Clipse media website.

“He has definitely written a war story?”

“Yes,”

“Of course, Remembrance Service on the 11th of the 11th last month that is when I read about it.”

“Theo, when you dip into the usb everything will fall into place.”

“When do you plan to see the author next?”

“The last time we arranged to meet at the Italian cafe near to where he lives. However, it was shut for renovations. He emailed me an hour before, and I went to his house.”

“What was it like?”

“Full of old furniture, books, paintings, everything in a mess, a bit smelly, but he was really quite nice.”

“Does he live alone?”

“Yes, that is the strange thing, he is good looking, but no sign of a woman.”

“Or a man?”

“No sign of that either,” giggled Freddie.

“Once the fee is settled with Topaz, I will invite him to a gathering here in town next month. We are having a celebration of local heroes. What’s his name?”

“Harry Katz.”

“Jewish.”

“Yes, but not practicing, as they say.”

“Well, Harry can come along as a local hero. There will be many other writers just like him there. We are having a special award this year for Mary Montague for her work. She has been such a good ambassador for helping with displaced families, and the homeless in and around the city.”

“Will one of your reporters be chairing this event?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Who will it be?” enquired Freddie.

“Cynthia, of course.”

Freddie tried to act as if he had been to many such events in his young working life: “Sounds good, I missed it last year when Peter Fotheringay won the prize.”

“You have done your homework young man. You could be right; I was not there,” mocked Theo.

“Who was the editor then?” asked the young spook.

“I believe he was a former banker. As you know, he got into trouble money laundering, while running the Clipe Internet Media site. Apparently, he went on a cruise with his wife only to come back to an enquiry by the tax man.”

“Oh,” Freddie smirked, “Naughty boy.”

“It can happen.”

Freddie stirred: “The one thing I did come across in the village where the writer lives is that he is not liked by the local councillors. Apparently, Mr Katz protests all the time especially about the destruction of green space, cutting down of trees, destroying parks and

playing fields, to built nurseries and houses over them. This has led him into a dispute with the local councillors and some of the community.

“What is happening at the moment?”

“Oh, there is a hullabaloo, someone has taken him to court.”

“What is the latest?”

“Still going on, as far as I know.”

“Okay, I will get Len onto it. I am sure we can make something out of this.”

“And I will inform Topaz?”

“Yes do that. Cynthia can phone Mr Katz, schmooze him over, before the night of the Champions.”

“I like Cynthia.”

“Everyone like Cynthia. She will write and invite Mr Katz to the Champions night out next week in the city. You will be there Freddie?”

“Yes, I will. You should know, however Theo, Mr Katz, does not like speaking on the phone. He does not have a mobile?”

“No.”

14. Champions Night Out

The Champions Night got underway inside the Milton Hotel bang on 8pm. Everyone, who was anyone, in the city had arrived by then. All the guests were of course on their best behaviour. It is true to say these days few people arrived tipsy or even drunk before a function. The political correct world of 2024 was very much a way of life now.

Constant news feeds for the past two decades had indoctrinated the majority of citizens to behave themselves while in the public eye. Political forces had allowed pressure groups to school the majority of people not to be free in the way of acting with each other - well at least not in public.

The media promoted fear or alarm at every moment of the day just to keep them in check. It was like ancient times once again when everything went on, but people were only free to say what they thought when they were away from public gatherings. And even then, their conversations may be picked up by the tech

giants and fed back to all sorts of agencies who may or may not be affiliated to their elected members, or other interesting people. Smart people knew the imagination was the only place to be free from the deep state.

On a positive note, the country was rebuilding itself. The new King had been coronated and was now on his throne. Still no one knew the direction of the UK. There was uncertainty on how the country would rebrand itself. Educated people knew that you could not rebuild a pagan world. It had to be destroyed. Then society could be built up again. This frightened those in power. Rise and fall was the order of society as it was in olden times, as it was now. Educated people knew the masses at times would rise up, and the government of the day would have to manage it.

The speeches were relatively short at the Champions Night. In all it took just under two hours, then it was milling around in the hotel suite.

Clipe Media had hired this same posh hotel in the city centre for the past five years for their annual awards night. Theo did not object to that. The Champions Night was always a great success, he was told.

This year was no different. There was a free bar where everyone headed for after the awards, to have a sandwich or cake, a cup of coffee, tea, wine or beer.

Theo had not much to do, but shake hands with those who had been given the awards, and those who were happy the way the evening had gone.

“Now that you are a champion what are you going to be doing with yourself?” was his favourite question to the winners.

Soon he got board with it all. Circulating around a hotel suite in the city centre was not what Theo Rosenberg thought of as fun.

While circulating, Theo looked over towards the bar at the faraway wall and spotted some happy faces there. He also noticed a bald man standing next to him staring at him. The man looked as if he wanted to kiss him. "Well, time for a glass of a wine," he murmured to the man and moved by him.

The woman he had been introduced to at the start of proceedings from the Whistleblowers Association, stared at him too, as he approached her again. However, the middle aged grey haired woman, who looked like a Woke sympathiser, was pleased to see him. Her eyes flickered and she made a face at him as if to say: 'Well, that went quite well.'

It would have been wrong of him, he felt, not to stop again and say something to her. Theo repeated what he said to the bald man: "I think, I am due a glass of wine?"

Theo did not understand the bald man, even though he looked as if he had a few drinks. He kept staring at him as he stood there with the woman from the Whistleblowers Association. Was he part of a Clipse cult? On the other hand, Theo understood modern women, after all he was living with one. His wife Ann who had worked in corporate finance was a liberated woman, like this woman here, completely and utterly under the impression that men and women were equal. Well, that is what she told him when they met many years ago now in a bar in town. Back then, like most young men, gender politics were completely uninteresting to Theo Rosenberg, and he had not changed his mind since then, no matter what the media said.

Just at that moment, the bald man made a beeline for him. The man as soon as he approached the editor joked: "My wife loves the Clipe website," he confessed, as if she had been liberated by it.

Theo had no option but to chat with him for a time, then he headed for the bar, but he had to stop for a hired waitress was trying to move through the crowd of guests. She was being polite, stopping to let the guests pass. Up until this point she had managed to make her way round the guests with a tray of red and white wine uninterrupted. Theo the great opportunist took a glass from her tray. When he turned round he noticed a big cheesy grin on the face the woman from the Whistleblowers Association.

"First of the night, my dear, said Theo to the waitress in response to that.

The young waitress smiled, but did not reply. She waited for a space to appear so that she could get going round the guests again.

Just as he sipped the wine, young Freddy appeared. "Theo, that is Mr Katz over there standing alone, on the far left with his back to us."

Theo could see the writer Harry Katz was looking at a French impressionist painting above the fake fireplace. The editor before he took a drink of wine looked around at the crowd standing gathered around him. Knowing that another payment would be forthcoming for his good work from Mr Topaz, he nodded to Freddie.

The young spook could see that he was concentrating on what he was going to say to him and kept his council.

"Well, Freddie, you had better introduce me to him.

Theo wondered where Cynthia and Len had got to. They were nowhere to be seen. He said sarcastically: "Right ok, let's do it."

They both shuffled over to where Mr Katz was standing, in front of the fake fireplace. In his usual non conformist way the editor introduced himself to Mr Katz: "Hello. My name is Theo Rosenberg. I am the editor of Clipe media company, and the new Messenger freesheet. Thanks for coming along. Are you enjoying the Champions Night, sir?"

Although Mr Katz turned away from the impressionist painting, he looked as if he was still wandering around inside it. The writer looked quite in a daze: "Were you on the voting committee?" he mumbled.

"No, not me. Mercifully, Mr Katz, I am only the editor of Clipe Media. I am afraid I am not qualified to judge others," appended Theo smiling, "They tell me to come here and look after the Champions and their friends."

"It is the first time I have been to such an event," responded Mr Katz shyly.

"Well, I hope you are enjoying it, sir."

Attempting to be social, Mr Katz went on: "Yes, even though I never made it to be a champion it has been an interesting night."

"Let me introduce you again to Freddie Fadalla. Young Freddie now works for Outside Source Media. They are one of our associate members at Clipe Media."

Freddie had made the effort all right; he was dressed in a smart dark suit with a nice pink cravat to compliment it. A slow smile crossed his young face, as he looked at Mr Katz, as if gauging his male sexuality.

“Please to meet you again Mr Katz,” said the young lad softly, and offered him a thin limp hand.

Theo could see that Freddie was more than playing his part. He knew he had to show an interest in the writer somehow. However, a stern look from the editor told him not to overdo it.

As arranged earlier with the boss, Cynthia appeared to see how things were going: “Ah, Cynthia, I was just looking for you,” said the editor smiling.

“I had to help Mrs Montague into her cab. She is a bit frail now.”

Mr Katz was obviously well informed: “Oh, was that Mary Montague who won the prize last year too,” he asked innocently.

Freddie, keen to show off his skill, interjected “No, that was Peter Fotheringay from the trading association that won last year. Ms Montague got the special award this year, as you know.”

“You are well informed,” replied Mr Katz, smiling sadly. “Peter is my neighbour.”

This break in the conversation gave Freddie the chance to chat up the novelist.

“Are you writing at the moment Mr Katz...”

Theo and Cynthia turned to each other; for they had lots to talk about. At the last board meeting they all agreed that all guests should receive a follow up email, after the Champions Night out. The plan was to get them to sign up for a subscription to receive both the Clipe website, and the Messenger freesheet. Another offer was on travel and free tickets for concerts.

As the two of them knocked back and forth old and new ideas about the next publication of Clipe, Theo listened into the conversation next to him.

“Oh, that’s fantastic, Mr Katz, I am sure the new book will do well...”

“Well, I will do my best, I suppose to offer them,” admitted Mr Katz diffidently.

“What kind of things do you like to read, Mr Katz?”

“Oh, please call me Harry. Mainly war stories, historical action packed dramas involving soldiers and spies.”

“Wonderful. Where do you get your ideas from, Harry?”

“Here and there, I guess.”

“I will need to read one of your books,” ventured Freddie.

“You like books?” asked Mr Katz.

“Very much, I am reading Dostoevsky at the moment. When I was in Prague I visited the place where he went for tea,”

“You were lucky Freddie; I would love to have seen that.”

“Yes, it was nice; Prague I really enjoyed,” said Freddie quietly.

“Do you visit places here in Scotland too, Freddie?”

“Yes, when I can, weather permitting of course.”

“What do you think Freddie, of Glasgow being the spy capital of the world?”

“Well they say everyone now is working for someone these days, Harry, even though no one seems to notice what is going on. Interesting times.”

15. The Office Motto

The following week Theo Rosenberg was sitting in his office reading an interesting article that had found its way into the new freesheet the Messenger. Everyone was pleased that the new title was up and running, and doing quite well. Suddenly, he stopped reading about the golfer who had been found drunk, after a late night party, in another guest's hotel room. The reason for this was obvious: the heading next to it was more interesting: Religious writer forced to come out after love affair with young student.

Harry Katz, a writer of modern fiction, and religious books has been forced to come out after it was revealed that he has been in a relationship with a teenage lad.

They both met at the Champions award ceremony last month in Glasgow. After a short love affair with the young nineteen year old medical student, Freddie Fadalla, they have decided to split. "It's all over," the

young lad has posted on the Internet “I am broken hearted.”

This relationship the editor could see was not just all over: “It is all over social media,” one well known blogger reported.

Due to the affair with the young student Freddie Fadalla, the writer Mr Katz has had to give up his role sitting on the committee promoting traditional marriages within society on behalf of Scottish churches.

Theo had read thousands of articles like this before; although this is the first one he had been involved in the actual sting.

He could see that behind this media operation was the man they call Topaz. He knew there were many like him, out there ready to destroy reputations of famous people, and not so famous people. No matter where they operated from, people like Topaz could ruin a man’s career in the blink of an eye, or to be more factual: a well orchestrated social media campaign could do that.

Theo knew the street actor Freddie Fadalla had been used by his agency to ‘do the hit,’ on the local writer, as they say in the trade. From the article on the Internet, the editor could see it had certainly ruined the writer’s reputation.

Sometimes Theo wondered why he did not have sympathy for those who had been brought down by the spooks. He could see that it was not Mr Katz’s books that troubled them - whoever they were - but it was his involvement in the church. That was interesting to the editor.

Theo had heard that to attack the church was to attack the state these days. He could see that foreign

agencies were interested in that, and they were pouring their agents into the Scottish Kirk.

Theo did not like Freddie, but he could see that he had played his part well. In many ways he was just like him. Life was a race to the bottom. Trust no one, clipe on everyone. After all, this was the office motto on the wall, where he now worked.

Seek out scandal, expose the dogooders. Clipe of everyone.

The spooks of course he knew after the hit moved back into the shadows, and for those at Clipe Media they moved onto the next story. If it bleeds it leads.

There was only one problem with this new job: Theo knew he was no publicist. Although, people knew who he was and that he was boss, he did not know how to make a good story happen. He would have to rely on Cynthia and others for that.

The editor had already offered Freddie a job in-house. He had run this by Jason Robertson down south. Topaz could ruin the reputations of who he liked through the street spook. As long as the editor was paid upfront and on the dot, Theo would let them do what they wished. Like many others in life: happiness for Theo was only ongoing when money was pouring in. He knew the editor had the final say on every article that went into the Clipe website. He had a year to make his pile. Then he would be out of here, as he was always saying in an American accent, when he left the office at night: "Am out of here..."

It was soon known on the dark web that if someone wanted to use the Clipe Media company, to expose

another, they could do that as long as they paid in advance. That was fair enough was it not.

Theo was not for turning. He wrote down in his diary just the other night before turning over: Do the deal, and let them print what they like.

Freddie knew Theo would do anything for money. Freddie was at an age he could seduce authors and spill the beans online. He would make a good reporter for Clipe Media. Yes, after the controversy about Mr Katz died down, The editor would get him working in the office.

Theo at the next editor's meeting put the idea in all the heads of all who were there. In fact, he went further than that he proposed it. Just before everyone left he turned and said to Cynthia: "I think Freddie should join the team sooner rather than later. What do you think Cindy?"

Cynthia looked up for she was just about to put her folder in her bag: "Well, he is young enough, but don't you think, boss, we should wait until the Katz storm dies down?"

"Cynthia, in this time we are living in, no one is shocked by anything anymore, other than the fact they can do nothing about it."

That got a laugh, from most if not all of the Clipe reporters still in the room. They knew it was true. This was an age where scandal only lasted as long as a day. then the next day another sordid story would appear, and so it went on.

Freddie, the editor knew, could go round the town and look for stories and search for things on the Internet at home, or in the office. The appointment would please Topaz. There was nothing else like it: money made friends and friends made money.

Theo was always reminding the team: “If some agency contacts you and wishes to expose someone, then please run it by me. We need clipe everywhere.”

That week some of Mr Katz’s friends called the Clipe office and asked to speak to the editor. Theo was always available. Taking a call the staff could see the editor always listened to their petitions while he played with his favourite app on his mobile device.

“Well, madam, I can only report on what information comes into my office. In this case if an author has fallen in love with a young teenage lad, and thereafter they fall out over a planned visit to America, or something like that, I can only put that to the public, via Clipe Media. As far as I know, the story is all over the Internet. It is up to the reader to make up his or her mind, if a man is a fit and proper person to sit on a church committee for the protection of traditional marriages in society, and then runs off with a teenage lad. I would say that is a good story.”

Unlike the last caller most complainers who phoned in just hung up after making their point:

“You are a gutter snipe!”

“You are just like the rest of them - corrupt!”

However, one woman got through to Theo that morning was so angry she howled down the phone at him: “What are you doing printing lies about Mr Katz! He is a fine man. You are just a little shit! That’s all you are,” and on and on she went. “We used to have good journalists in this city, not corporate junkies like you...”

Theo was not the type of man who bothered about this kind of thing. Many editors would have been upset and put down the phone - not him. He showed no emotion in the office when taking such calls. Theo thought it entertaining. He liked to get people upset. He

would calmly say to them: “Thank you for calling Clipe Media, madam. Have a nice day.”

Cynthia, who was beside him today, could not help but listen in especially when she heard a high pitch scream come out of her boss’s mobile phone.

“Thank you sir. Please make sure to leave a comment on the Clipe Media corporation website,” was another phrase her boss often used.

Cynthia laughed when she heard her boss say to her: “I think it is time for lunch,” and stretched himself out like he won the lottery. “Angry callers give me a good appetite.”

Theo always enjoyed chatting in the executive Lomond suite, especially with others after the editor’s meeting broke up.

Cynthia was excited about the news that the Dead Rockets were touring again, and not only that they are coming to Glasgow next month. She told Theo this.

“It is already a sellout!”

“Where is the concert?” asked the editor.

“It is in the main football stadium in the city. We need to do a big spread on it.”

Theo leant back in his executive chair. They were alone now; the others had gone out of the room. The arts gave Theo no worries at all. He relaxed. Cynthia knew she could do what she liked, as long as she told him what she was doing.

“Cynthia try and get an interview with the lead singer when the band comes to town. What’s his name again?”

“David Ruthven. I agree boss; he is always in trouble with his out spoken comments on social media.”

“An interview will go down well with him on our Live page,” commented Theo,” as he stretched his arms

out wide: “Better text our new addition to the firm, see where he has got to.”

“You mean Freddie Fadalla ?” asked Cynthia, as she moved her handbag from under the table and placed it on top of it: “He is certainly going to bring something different - that’s for sure, boss.”

Theo knew Cynthia got on with everyone, even if she did not fancy them as friends, or associates. However, he could see she had not taken to Freddie, but Cynthia did not let that affect her. This no doubt came from her dealing with show business people. Cynthia was good at not upsetting others. She pretended to be polite; it was a device she used in her private life too, he guessed. Cynthia had a way of not really listening when the conversation was fraught, or she did not see it as within her purview. It was a sure sign when she checked her mobile, or called a friend, that she was moving away from any controversial topic.

Theo saw her looking at a text on her phone. He asked her: “Anything interesting, Cindy?”

No just some irate woman on about the author Mr Katz, and his liaison with the new wonder boy reporter young Fadalla.”

“Oh, I have had my fair share of callers about that this morning,” laughed the editor, adding a warning: “Freddie had better keep an eye out down at the Pink club in town. If Mr Katz friends turn up there, he could be in trouble.”

They both laughed at the thought of that, and the comedy of an older man falling out of love with a younger man.”

“Right, okay back to the band Cynthia. Where are they playing just now?”

“They are in London, boss, for a three day concert. Then next week they go to Liverpool, then Manchester, before arriving here in Glasgow.”

“I tell you what Cynthia get down to London and get into their dressing room. Try and get something on them for the Clipe website, before they head up north. Find out if they are looking forward to coming to Glasgow, on their world tour. You know the kind of thing. What have they been up to partying and loose living? You have got the contacts down there haven’t you.”

“Sure have. Still got Dave at MMG records, who I used to work with.”

“Keep me posted, where you are staying and when you will be back up the road.”

Theo’s phone rang. He could see that it was a new number calling him.

“Theo Rosenberg speaking, editor of Clipe Media.”

“I am a man in search of Edward Heath,” said the joker on the other end of the line.:

“Where are you Freddie?”

Theo put him on loudspeaker to share the joke with Cynthia, but she did not know who it was at first.

“Oh, Theo dear. Have you a new assignment for me with older men. I am so excited about this new role you have offered me...”

Cynthia thought it a good joke, even though she did not know what he meant.

“Right Freddie, see you later”

In any case, Cynthia was too busy to bother about this; she was planning her trip to London and had now no time for small chat - even with her boss. She was not hanging around: “Right that’s the flights booked,” she said like someone off to see King Charles. “I will need to

get onto the promoter now to get me a ticket for tomorrow's concert in London for the Dead Rockets."

Suddenly, the door of the Loudon suite opened and in came Freddie Fadalla.

Theo relaxed when he saw him. He put down his mobile phone on the oak table, leaned back and asked the young fellow: "Well, tell us all about it Freddie what actually happened with you and Mr Katz."

As soon as he sat down opposite the editor out came the story: "Well, we met at the Burrell Collection, and from there we ended up in bar in the Shawlands area - can't remember the name of it. After a few glasses of wine, I invited the writer back home to meet my mother. The story about her always beating me up must have worked. Before leaving the bar, he patted me on the cheek, and whispered to me, 'I will have a quiet word with her.'"

Cynthia looked from the image of the ticket for her flight on her mobile device, as if to say: "Interesting."

"When we arrived of course mother was out and Oliver my dancing partner just happened to be there dressed as usual in his inappropriate cyber gear: black tights, fishnets, and see through vest. All ready for his afternoon Internet cam show; for the benefit of his adoring fans."

"Sounds interesting Freddie," interrupted his boss.

"Got a nice pic of us all sitting there on the couch playing with the play station. This, as you know, was uploaded to all well known social media sites."

Theo did not react to this, but looked over at the flatscreen they never used. He then stood up, walked over to it, and after fingering some dust off of it said in an ironic tone: "And all carried out from behind the wall, eh."

Cynthia did not get the joke: "Behind the wall," she wondered as if the meaning would come to her.

"Just a little joke between Freddie and I."

"That's right, Mr Rosenberg."

"We have just had another admirer of Mr Katz on the phone - haven't we Cynthia?"

"There have been quite a few this morning, boss."

"Have we to do a follow up article?" asked the editor looking at Freddie the young spook.

"Haven't had any word Mr Rosenberg - will let you know. There will be another wonderful story no doubt coming our way after the next target."

"Who is that?" asked Theo

"Wouldn't you like to know..."

Freddie's mother at the moment was giving him lots of stick about him staying out late. Apparently, Freddie had told her that he had to work late at the Clipe office. In fact, she had phoned Theo about this.

"Where are you going at night Freddie?" the editor enquired, as he winked at Cynthia.

"Why?"

"Your mother is not impressed. She told me that she needs to see you more at home now that she is getting older. She was telling me your brother and sister are going to secondary school next year, and they will be facing all the things teenagers face and that you are needed there to help them."

"When did she say that to you?" asked Freddie embarrassed.

Theo made a joke: "You should stop annoying her Freddie saying things to her like: they will have to decide what sex are they before going to secondary school?"

"When did she say that?"

“She was bealing.”

“Well, it is the time we are living in, anything goes does it not. Even the church down the road has a same sex minister.”

Theo thought about all that and, after a moment or two, he openly wondered: “Yes, it is such a strange generation. However, if you look around your own area you will see things are not good. The cost of living crisis; inflation. You would do well Freddie to help mamma.”

Cynthia, ever helpful, became a peacemaker: “Yes, there is no one like mum.”

“Your mother said to me before she signed off: ‘You might live in a bubble, Mr Rosenberg, but I am struggling to keep Freddie on the straight and narrow.’”

Just then Freddie's mobile phone rang. He picked it out of his jacket pocket and after a few moments he answered: “I will do that,” then he switched it off immediately and put it back where it came from.

As Freddie went out of the Loudon suite along with Cynthia, Theo looked up and wished her well: “Good luck with the Dead Rockets, Cindy.”

When Freddie came back ten minutes later and they were alone, the young spook announced in his usual street acting way: “Topaz wants you to investigate a blogger called Heather Sykes. She runs a website called: Pie in the Sky.”

“Yes, I have read her blog. She is very good at what she does. She comes from Kilmacolm, if I remember correctly?

“Have you met her?”

“No, but I have been to Kilmacolm; it is a lovely area.”

“Topaz wants you to head there again, and this time go to the cafe bar on the site of the old station, and

there you will be met with a man in dark clothes carrying a modern novel.”

“That’s a great help. Most people wear dark clothes in Scotland,” mocked Theo.

“The man will be reading a book titled Stassiland by Anna Funder.”

“That sounds appropriate.”

“Our friend will give you some interesting information about the pie in the sky blogger. When you get back to the office let Topaz know what it says and we will take it from there.”

“It is the same fee for Kilmacolm as the Russian girl,” demanded Theo without hesitation

“I will run it by him,” nodded Freddie breaking back into his boy band spirit: “I am sure that will be fine.”

The editor took it all in his stride: “So, it is off to Kilmacolm for the editor of the Clipe internet website. Sounds good to me.”

16. Off to Kilmacolm

As soon as he got out of his Porsche 911, Theo spotted the old cafe bar down at the cross. He remembered it from when he was a boy. He reckoned that the parking space opposite the old church in the middle of the village Killmacolm would be free for most of the day. The editor snuck in there.

Even though it was early, Theo's eye was in. He looked around to see what was interesting. As he walked down the village street, memories of the old cafe bar, came back to him, where the roads met at the cross. This is where his parents took him when he was young. Having good memories of this village, and knowing that he was early for his appointment, the editor of Clipse Media walked down remembering ice cream cones, picnics in the woods, and the big flask his parents always took with them on away days.

Theo knew the place he had to meet his contact was over where the old train station used to be at the edge of the village. He did not want to go there until the

appointed time. He was in good time to meet the man who was carrying the book Stassiland about with him. Theo relaxed and took in everything around him. His Armani suit he knew would get him some looks as he walked through this small town. There were of course shops here and there, but he remembered none of them. It was the old cafe at the cross most of all he remembered, and he was looking forward to seeing it again.

“Ah, yes that’s it,” he said to himself as he approached the old cafe where the two roads met.

Of course, everything looked bigger when he was a boy. Now that he was a man, he thought that the only thing new was the door. Theo, as soon as he stepped inside that door, could also see that there was something happening here at the old cafe today. “What is it?” he couldn’t help but wonder.

He knew by the happy faces coming and going up and down the little staircase that something was indeed going on inside the old cafe bar in Kilmacolm.

As soon as he stepped inside, the face of an elderly lady greeted him. “Good morning, sir.”

“Why is it so busy today?” enquired the editor of Clipe Media.

The elderly lady behind the counter stared at him: “Have you not heard,”

“No”

“Is it a special occasion.”

“Well, I have come on the right day. I am Theo Rosenberg, editor of Clipe Media in Glasgow. We can certainly do something for you on our local news page.”

“It’s our last day of trading.”

“What! You are leaving the village?”

“Yes, I am afraid the new generation are not wanting to take our cafe forward into the next era.”

“That’s a shame.”

He could see that the woman was more European than Scottish, even though she may have been born here in Scotland.

For whatever reason her passion for the cafe bar had not been passed to her grandchildren, and therefore like many other things at this time of life in Scotland: a long cherished tradition was coming to an end. No longer would the old culture be active in the community, as it had been before from the centre of the village since the mid thirties.

“Yes, that is sad,” sighed the editor, “Many people will agree with that.”

The editor could see she was hiding her sorrow well. Though to him, she seemed to have already crossed the line that had been broken in her soul. She had resigned herself to the fact that she was trying to be happy on the last day of trading for the sake of those gone before. And everything considered she was doing just that.

Theo looked upstairs to where people were milling around; some drinking coffee, others eating cake and ice cream. They all seemed quite happy at the death of the old cafe bar. Anyone coming in off the street he could see looked pretty jolly too, even though this was the last day of trading.

The special guests were no doubt villagers, and friends of friends. Everyone rejoicing like happy mourners. It obviously had not occurred to them that all the people who had enjoyed an ice cream and a coffee here in this lovely cafe bar would never return to do it again.

Theo was just about to leave when he heard a woman talking to the elderly owner of the old cafe bar. The owner, who had been upstairs, and come back down, was now on her way up the stairs again.

“Oh, there was nowhere like it. There will never be another. We will never see its likes again,” said one honest voice from the community to her.

And with that echoing in his analytical brain, the editor of Clipe Media, Theo Rosenberg, like many others that day, for the last time left the old cafe bar in Kilmacolm.

Along the road in the direction where he knew the train station used to be, Theo walked on until he saw the place where he had to rendezvous with his contact. It was a small tearoom: “Good morning. Can I help you?” said a young voice, as soon as he entered.

He could not help but notice the girl behind the counter who was now staring at him was dressed in a school uniform. She looked as if she was going to be reprimanded about something she had done. He could see this was a cafe started up by someone as a hobby.

It was a bit like an old transport cafe in olden days that he used to pop in to where you could go and get a coffee, or cup of tea, and something to eat, before getting back in your car.

Yes, there was no doubt about it this was the kind of place where anonymous people could meet, greet and rendezvous. There was no Wi-Fi, no surveillance cameras in here.

“Coffee please, young lady.”

Theo always loved to mock young people: “Is this the tuck shop?”

He smiled as he looked over at other school kids sitting there in the tea room - no doubt her friends.

“My aunt has just popped out, sir. She will be back in a minute. I am just helping out,” answered the school girl sweetly to the jibe. “I am looking after the shop until she gets back.”

Just at that moment, the door opened and in came a man in a black coat carrying a copy of *Stassiland*. He too ordered a coffee and sat down.

Topaz instructions, via the young street actor Freddie Faddalla, were not to speak to him. His instructions were: “The contact will leave behind a book on his table, and when he is out the door you will notice he has done this. Pick it up from where he left it, and go after him.”

Ten minutes later as planned this indeed did take place. As soon as the man in the black coat at the next table was out of the door, the editor of *Clipe Media* picked up the book and went after him, saying to the school kid behind the counter: “Oh, I will give it to him,” and away he went.

However, outside Theo put the book in his pocket, crossed the road and walked towards his Porsche car up by the church, and from there headed straight back to Glasgow.

Theo knew that the information about Heather Sykes, and her contacts, were now in his possession, inside the novel to be delivered to Topaz. He would await instructions as to how to deal with the story about Ms Sykes from the young street actor Freddie Fadalla.

When he got back to the office, Theo indeed needed a drink. He felt daft as a brush as the saying goes. It was as if someone was taking the mickey out of him.

However, the money to be paid into his account from Topaz soothed any awkward feelings inside him.

Theo no matter where he had worked always kept a half bottle of whisky in his desk. He went straight to it, opened the bottom drawer, put it in his Armani jacket suit pocket, then went into the toilet. Once inside the cubical he had a good swig of it.

All through his career, Theo had done this. He was not a heavy drinker. It was only at times he needed to escape the dark forces that he knew were everywhere, not just in life but in industry where he worked. It was late now and most of the staff he could see had gone. He could have gone to the bar in the office, but Theo was discreet about his drinking. One good measure was good enough to chase away any unwanted fears.

After this he settled back down in the Loudon suite and read the report, to be passed on to Topaz, that was printed out inside the novel he had brought back with him from Kilmacolm.

Davies lives in the city centre of Glasgow, and owns many properties, though he seldom is involved with them and the running of any businesses. His main focus these days is on writing articles for a syndicate of newspapers, all well known to the public via the Internet. Davies puts forward the post Brexit view quite carefully never showing up the negative side for anyone who wants to invest in Europe.

The target is not him, but his wife Heather Sykes who runs his companies for him; she has received lots of government grants, and is in touch with many government ministers. The equipment during the pandemic for hospitals was one such benefit scheme she was involved in. This has been exploited. More details can be seen about this venture on her website. This is just a front for her other activities which are processing

funds for illegal immigration and drugs. Ms Sykes will be meeting again soon with her associates, and you should send a photographer along to record them together in the club in town where they usually meet. We will be in touch as to that date.

There is no sign of any sexual relationships with his wife and any of men or women that she sees regularly, but an interview with her should expose her vulnerability at accepting money from said government sources.

17. Revenge of Mr Katz

Six months later when Cynthia came in to the Clipe office. Theo saw what it was that made him admire her. When he looked at Cynthia he could see that she had contentment. Cynthia worked as hard as anyone, but she was happy at her work. The editor could see that.

Theo now had enough money from Topaz and he knew he would be out of here soon. Sometimes he wondered if he had been acting for the Russians or the Chinese. However, who it was that was behind the deception could remain a mystery to the editor of Clipe Media.

Theo could not care less about who they were. He had no affiliation now to any country. For him it was simply not worth having. It was a dog eat dog world. That's why he had been saving up these payments along with his wage. He now had an escape route out of this myopic world he lived in. Yes, he could break free from it all.

His wife he would leave a note: 'Off abroad my dear. Take care.' He had sent it so many times in his mind. Most couples broke up. Things were getting ridiculous at home; if he did not return the salt to the right place at breakfast, or did not wear the right coat to work in the morning his card was marked for the rest of the day. The divorce rate was at an all time high. Most folk just lived together, until one walked out.

Ann even slept in the spare room now and really only saw him at the breakfast table. His wife watched endless talk shows, boasted about friends that she never saw anymore. Ann was what he termed a nice person, always active with women's' groups chatting online all the time, as if something important was going on.

When it came for the parents to turn up at the school she never asked him to go along with her. He could almost hear her say to the other mums outside the school gate: "Oh, Theo works in publishing; he never gets time off. Hardly see him. He is always up early, back late."

In Vietnam he had heard that you could live like a king there. Theo saw death as a black curtain coming down on him, saying: The End. Just like it was when he was young and when to the cinema.

"Busy day ahead Theo?" asked Ann his wife as she sat down on the large cushion in the chair in the kitchen.

"I am sure it will be, darling."

He hated the house he lived in. It was modern in every aspect - that was the trouble with it. It was just so impersonal: no dust, no dirt, everything clean as a whistle, and tidy just like you saw on every tv sitcom.

He had even thought of knocking off his wife, but what good would that do. He had enough money now thanks to all those payments from Topaz.

It was eight o'clock: "Better get going," he said, as he gulped at his cup of tea.

Theo grabbed his jacket from behind his chair; his keys he picked up at the door, and he was gone. His teenage daughter knew that he never said anything to their mother other than: "See you later."

"Love you," she would shout back.

He hated that most of all "It is so false, so insincere." many times he had written this down in his diary.

It was quite a busy day the story about Heather Sykes, the woman who had connections with politicians, was the headline story:

High society woman getting wads of cash from government friends. The police have been asked to look into this by the office regulating public money.

That was enough for now. The old fox Theo Rosenberg knew there would be a follow up on her personal life. Skeletons would soon be creeping not only out of their cupboards but their tombs, and before the week was over her house and garden would be searched. Heather Sykes, husband and friends would be called upon by the police. They would setup their tent in her garden and their grounds would be dug up.

The editor could see the number of the street spook on his mobile phone was ringing again. It was young Freddie.

"Theo, I am traveling on the train, I see the story..."

“Yes, Freddie we published it.” Theo laughed, then added with a wry smile on his face: “I think it best to meet again just to tidy things up. Megs the Bakers - ok with you...”

At the end of the year, Theo had sent a date to quit his job at Clipe Media. A friend of his Andy, from when he worked with a newspaper in London, was happy living in the far east. He had emailed him and they had picked up things again the way old pals do. Andy had bought a place for Theo in a coastal resort near to where he himself was living in Nha Trang.

The plan was to buy more properties there, then rent them out to tourists. His friend Andy had been in the music business and had made millions. Presently, a website for European travellers was setup. Theo and Andy both knew the never-ending cycle of people travelling the globe needed a nice place to stay for a night or two. After all, the Brits always stuck together abroad. Post Brexit this was happening more now for safety than for commerce. You could fend off adversaries that way.

Although they did not know it last week was the last time with his team. He was not sentimental. Right after that meeting, Theo contacted his financial advisor on the dark web and oversaw arrangements for his money to be paid to him when he was abroad. He even had a few bit coins thrown in just in case he needed them. It was a good lunch he had with his advisor in a fancy restaurant in town; the plan he knew would be executed the next day. After they shook hands he was assured of success. If the fund is shut down it could be transferred to another account. His agent had even checked that members online who worked for his client could do a deal with any problems if anything untoward

happened. The trustees, as they were called, received a thank you payment from Theo for doing this. Everyone was happy. Theo Rosenberg now started to plan his exit strategy.

The day had finally come. Theo had made enough money. The editor of Clipe Media would now escape to the far east. Vietnam was the destination Theo Rosenberg would never return. The flight was one way.

At the airport after checking in his large case Theo went for something to drink at the cafe inside the terminal. Just as he finished his coffee he looked up. There in amongst a crowd of tourists he saw the writer Harry Katz making his way across the concourse in the direction of the taxi rank. His sallow face gave the editor of Clipe such a strange smile.

Theo suddenly did not feel well; he felt sick as if everything was contracting within him. He looked down at his coffee carton. When Theo looked up the barista stared at him. Then all of a sudden the young foreign looking barista waved over to the crowd passing through the airport: "See you soon Harry. Hurry Back!

The next day in the Clipe media website the lead story was not about politics, or any scandal in the city. It simply read:

We are sad to announce the death of the Editor of Clipe Media, Theo Rosenberg. The editor took unwell at the airport before a connecting flight to London. His friends in the publishing industry, who worked with him, are supporting his wife and daughter.

Album from the novel, With Friends Like That:

<https://music.apple.com/gb/artist/john-a-walker/358516418>

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/1Z6rEOcywB54sBbnoxeg4u>

The Bail Trilogy is a collection of three works were written during the time when the writer was on bail. It consists of two novels: Underground Boy; Behind the Wall; and an album, With Friends Like That,

Background to the dispute:

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